BETHLEHEM 2000 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Rome, 18 and 19 February 1999

United Nations, New York

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I. INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

The Bethlehem 2000 International Conference was organized under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and was held at FAO headquarters in Rome, on 18 and 19 February 1999.

The Conference's objective was to mobilize the widest international support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project of the Palestinian Authority for the celebration of the new millennium in Bethlehem in a global vision of peace and reconciliation. With the support of the Government of Italy, the Conference provided an opportunity for Governments, intergovernmental organizations, religious and cultural personalities and institutions, parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations to engage in dialogue and cooperation for the promotion of peace and reconciliation.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFERENCE

The Conference was attended by 93 Governments, 7 United Nations organs, agencies and bodies, 3 intergovernmental organizations and 71 non-governmental organizations. The Committee delegation was composed of H.E. Ibra Deguène Ka (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee; H.E. Dr. Ravan A. G. Farhâdi (Afghanistan) and H.E. Mr. Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla (Cuba), Vice-Chairmen of the Committee; H.E. Mr. George Saliba (Malta), Rapporteur, H.E. Mme. Mahawa Bangoura Camara (Guinea), member of the Committee; and H.E. Dr. Nasser Al-Kidwa (Palestine).

At the opening meeting held on the morning of 18 February, statements were made by: The Honourable Francesco Rutelli, Mayor of Rome; Sir Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations; His Eminence Roger Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and Head of the Holy See delegation; H.E. Mr. Jacques Baudin, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal; H.E. Dr. Azeddine Laraki, Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; H.E. Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People; Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; H.E. Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic; and H.E. Mr. Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority.

In the high-level plenary entitled "Celebrating the new millennium in a global vision of peace and reconciliation", on the afternoon of 18 February, statements were made by H.E. Mr. Said Kamal, Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States; His Beatitude Msgr. Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem; the Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA; Reverend Father Archpriest Victor Petlyuchenko, Deputy Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, Moscow Patriarchate, Representative of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia; His Eminence Cardinal Anba Moussa, General Archpriest, Representative of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III; His Eminence The Metropolitan of Switzerland, Damaskinos Papandreou, Representative of His Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch; Ambassador Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, President of the Islamic Cultural Centre, Rome; Mr. Dwain C. Epps, Director, Programme Unit III - Justice, Peace and Creation, World Council of Churches; and the Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek, Director of Sabeel, Jerusalem.

The plenary entitled "Preparing for the millennium celebrations" was addressed by Dr. Nabeel Kassis, Minister, Coordinator-General of the Bethlehem 2000 Project Authority; Mr. Hanna Nasser, Mayor of Bethlehem; Mr. Nabil Sarraf, Vice-President, Palestine Development and Investment Company; and Mr. Valdo Spini, President of the Parliamentary Association of Friendship Italy-Israel.

The plenary entitled "Voice and responsibilities of Parliaments: Initiatives in connection with Bethlehem 2000" was addressed by Mr. Miguel Angel Martinez, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Council; The Honourable Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies; Senator Domenico Fisichella, Vice-President of the Italian Senate, on behalf of The Honourable Nicola Mancino, President of the Italian Senate; Mr. Humayun Rasheed Choudhury, Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament; and H.E. Mr. Nahad Ibrahim Abdel Latif, Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt, on behalf of Dr. Ahmed Fathi Sourour, Speaker of the People's Assembly, President of the Arab Parliamentary Council.

At the closing meeting, held in the afternoon of 19 February, statements were made by H.E. Mr. Rino Serri, Senator, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy, Representative of the Host Government; Mr. Nabeel Kassis, Minister, Coordinator-General of the Bethlehem 2000 Project Authority, representative of Palestine; and H.E. Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. H.E. Mr. George Saliba, Rapporteur of the Committee, presented the Rome Declaration on Bethlehem 2000 (see section VII of this report).

The present report contains the full text of statements made by invited speakers in accordance with the programme of the Conference.

II. OPENING SESSION

THE HONOURABLE FRANCESCO RUTELLI
Mayor of Rome

All roads lead to Rome, according to one of the most famous sayings of the world; however, from Rome 2,000 years ago, a decision taken a few metres from here, by Emperor Augustus, caused the family of a simple carpenter to participate in the census in the land of Palestine; that road led to Bethlehem. And the story of the world was forever changed.

In extending a cordial, warm and sincere welcome to you on behalf of the City of Rome, I should like to affirm today the commitment of our city and of all Italian towns and trade unions to support this Bethlehem 2000 Project.

We reaffirm a commitment, which will serve to illustrate in concrete fashion that development, employment, stability and calm in Palestinian land is clearly also closely linked to development of accommodation, of programmes for tourism, for the organization of visits by pilgrims and all those who wish to go to the Holy Land and for Catholics, for that land in the Middle East is dearly loved throughout the entire world.

Finally, allow me, on my own behalf and on behalf of the City of Rome, to extend best wishes to this Conference which we have the honour of hosting, thanks to the commitment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

I hope that this Conference will make a definite contribution, at the political, diplomatic and economic levels, so that the year 2000 may be celebrated in Palestine, in Israel, in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean with a genuine, just and lasting peace, for that is in the interest of the world as a whole.

That is what the people of that land are demanding from us; that is the question, the imperative that all people of good will and that the authorities in all parts of the world must answer.

I wish the Conference on Bethlehem 2000 every success in its work.

H.E. MR. KOFI ANNAN
Secretary-General of the United Nations
(Message to the Conference delivered by Sir Kieran Prendergast,
Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs)

This Conference takes place as the whole world prepares for the celebration of the new millennium, which, after all, commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. The Palestinian City of Bethlehem, where Christ was born, will be a centre of this momentous observance, expected to bring some 2 million visitors from around the world.

Bethlehem's important religious and cultural sites have always beckoned pilgrims of all ages, religions, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds.

For centuries, Bethlehem has embodied hope in the minds of humankind. Whether we have had the privilege of visiting the city or not, its historic and sacred meaning shines like a lodestar in our consciousness. It reminds us of the bonds created by belief in faith's ability to heal humanity, of the power of prayer.

Today, this ancient city is in dire need of renovation. Without it, it will not be able to cope with such a huge influx of pilgrims and visitors. Its population of more than 125,000 - the majority of whom live in dismal conditions - places an enormous burden on the city's ageing infrastructure.

The Bethlehem 2000 Proje t of the Palestinian Authority is crucial, therefore, in ensuring the success of the anniversary.

Progress has already been made in achieving the Authority's objectives, which have the full support of the United Nations: improving municipal infrastructure and public services while restoring and preserving Bethlehem's rich archaeological, cultural and historical heritage.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank are working closely with the Palestinian Authority and the Bethlehem municipality on rehabilitating the city and restoring its historical sites, as well as those of the adjacent towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. The international donor community has pledged considerable funds and has been involved in specific projects.

I commend the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for its efforts to promote the Project.

I also wish to thank the Government of Italy for its hospitality and for the considerable assistance provided to the United Nations Secretariat in organizing this Conference.

Yet all these endeavours will come to naught if peace continues to elude the Palestinians and the Israelis. We must continue to focus all our efforts on achieving a negotiated settlement of the question of Palestine. Therefore, on behalf of the United Nations, I would like to send this message to all the parties to the peace process on the eve of the new millennium: strive to forgive the transgressions of the past and to build bridges of tolerance and trust for the future, so that you and your children may enjoy a truly lasting peace in the Middle East.

HIS EMINENCE ROGER CARDINAL ETCHEGARAY
Chairman of the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000,
Head of Delegation of the Holy See

Bethlehem is the first Holy City. I learned its name on my mother's knee as she told me of Jesus' birth in the stable in Bethlehem. It was wonderful. As a child, having become familiar with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men and even the angels, I used to regard Bethlehem as my home town - I felt I came from there!

Today I have the honour to represent the Holy See at this Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, convened under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. It is a pleasure to emphasize that the Conference was highly recommended by the United Nations General Assembly at its most recent session (18 November 1998) in a resolution that was, perhaps, the only one of the many on the Middle East to have been adopted unanimously by consensus.

The delegation of the Holy See is delighted that the Bethlehem 2000 cultural project, scheduled to run from Christmas 1999 to Easter 2001, is so deeply religious in character. The gesture of encouragement which the entire international community - exceptionally - has given this programme is most comforting to Christians, the followers of Christ who believe His coming on Earth to have been the greatest event in human history.

Jesus would appear to have been born in Bethlehem by chance, and lived there barely more than a day or two after his birth: the village where he spent his boyhood and youth was Nazareth, and he was called "Jesus of Galilee" (Matt. 26, 69). In truth, however, nothing to do with the Messiah was left to chance. Everything was foretold and announced by the prophets: the divine plan required Jesus to be born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matt. 2, 5-6) like his ancestor, King David, and the occasion was a census by a Roman emperor that brought Joseph, of David's line, to Bethlehem where Mary would give birth to the Emmanuel, thus turning the straggling village into the birthplace of God made man.

What country could have imagined such an honour? What man could have imagined such tidings? By our Christian calendar, it was 2,000 years ago. Today, throughout the world, the year 2000 is coming to seem like a neon sign blazing over all manner of profane, spectacular and commercial schemes. But if there is one city that can legitimately claim to have something real to celebrate in the year 2000, it is Bethlehem, which owes its true splendour to Christmas. There is no more perfect match between space and time, place and date than between Bethlehem and the year 2000.

The Bethlehem 2000 initiative complements the Great Jubilee, which John Paul II has been promoting tirelessly since the very beginning of his papacy. His Holiness considers that "the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem is not an event which can be consigned to the past. The whole of human history in fact stands in reference to him; our own time and the future of the world are illumined by his presence" (Bull of Indiction No. 1, 29 November 1998). Thus he was emboldened to say, in a preparatory meeting for the Jubilee with the cardinals, "In a sense, Jesus is the property of all mankind." Anyone can recognize himself in Him and even adopt Him, yet He will not allow Himself to be monopolized by anyone. This is indeed the view of the Church, which derives sustenance from the epiphanic vision of Bethlehem; the star above Bethlehem that guided the wise men "from the East" is a symbol of hospitality towards all peoples and all cultures.

Today, as 2,000 years ago, Bethlehem must bear the Christmas message it was privileged to hear for the first time in the music of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). Bethlehem's message is a universal one, but naturally it is addressed in the first place to the Holy Land fertilized by the Bible story. The land where Jesus was born, lived and died cannot but set an example to the world as a whole by making the glory of God and peace among men shine forth. All descendants of Abraham, the father of the faithful — Jews, Christians and Muslims — who together make up the population of the Middle East, are duty-bound to bear witness to true brotherhood before a disenchanted, disjoined world.

It is for this reason that Pope John Paul II wanted the forthcoming Jubilee to be celebrated, in the Roman tradition, not only in Rome but in the Holy Land "with the same dignity and the same importance" (Bull of Indiction No. 2). The Assembly of Catholic Bishops in the Holy Land has just published a festival calendar in Jerusalem which provided inspiration for the Christian elements of Bethlehem 2000. It is important that pilgrims to the Jubilee from all over the world should find the Holy Land at peace and ready to welcome them. But peace must not be an advertising slogan. One does not make peace primarily to attract pilgrims or tourists. It is, above all, a fundamental requirement for the people who live there day in and day out. It cannot be decreed, it does not depend on any process. It comes from a change of hearts and minds, it stems from the dignity that everyone enjoys when they are respected and suffer no discrimination or interference in their freedom of movement, professionally or socially. If justice and truth are not the same for all, there is neither justice nor truth, and there will be no lasting peace.

What Bethlehem offers today with its project for the year 2000 is as much a test as a challenge for all of us. Those who live amidst poverty, injustice or violence are entitled to ask their brethren to acknowledge their trampled dignity. Unless the poor, for whom Jesus' birth in Bethlehem brought hope, have rights, we cannot claim universal human rights as our inheritance.

It is my wish that this Conference, under the blaze of the international spotlights, can help Bethlehem and the Palestinian people to embark upon the year 2000 with all the resources they will need to blossom fully. According to one derivation, the word Bethlehem means "the house of bread". It is significant that this Conference is being held at the FAO. What Bethlehem needs in the first instance is, without question, concrete support. Through the spiritual happening brought to mind by the year 2000, we may imagine the descendants of the poor Christmas shepherds meeting many new wise men bearing precious gifts: the freedom and dignity that a people have been kept waiting for too long.

Year 2000 Bethlehem, you are not alone!

May your star guide many more footsteps towards you.

H.E. MR. JACQUES BAUDIN
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal,
on behalf of H.E. Mr. Abdou Diouf,
President of the Republic of Senegal

Mr. Chairman, you have already stated that President Abdou Diouf of Senegal has sent me to participate in this gathering. I left Dakar last night at 11 p.m. and arrived here this morning at 10 a.m. My presence here is testimony to President Diouf's total commitment and the commitment of the entire Senegalese people to the cause being defended by this Committee. This is also testimony for a message of peace and love throughout the world to bear witness to our common struggle to see justice and human dignity prevail.

If you will allow me, on behalf of the President of the Senegalese Republic, to extend the very sincere thanks of the Government of Senegal to the Italian Government which has been kind enough to host here in Rome — this old land of ancient civilizations — the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference. President Diouf has also asked me to extend to you, President Yasser Arafat, his deep-felt feelings of friendship and brotherhood, and also his personal support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project which you initiated. I would also like to convey, on behalf of the President, to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, our best wishes for the success of its endeavours in order to see this Project prosper with the assistance of the United Nations.

On the initiative of the Committee, the General Assembly, during its fifty-third session, adopted on 18 November 1998 by consensus a resolution expressing the support of the international community for the Bethlehem 2000 Project. Thus, this project has received the support and commitment of the entire community of nations which means that it has

a historic and religious and cultural dimension that rises above political and ideological rifts. It is because this Project is centred on Bethlehem — the land where Our Lord Jesus Christ was born almost 2,000 years ago — and also it is because it was designed to celebrate the second millennium of the birth of Christ in this land of Palestine, in the region of the major civilizations of the world. For all these reasons, therefore, Bethlehem must remain a land of peace and dialogue, a land of tolerance, of conciliation in this focal region of the world, the cradle of three revealed religions — Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This project therefore is not just a Project of the Palestinians. It is a Project in which we all have a stake. It is our common Project and it is for this reason that President Abdou Diouf has lent his support to this because it is the Project of the international community. Above and beyond its historical, cultural and religious dimensions, this Project has an economic and social dimension because it will enable us to improve the infrastructure of the City of Bethlehem, to rehabilitate it, to restore the major archaeological and historical sites and to foster tourism.

Senegal welcomes the support of the international community for the Bethlehem 2000 Project and would like to reiterate its full support for President Arafat and the organizational committee. The consensus that has been galvanized around this Project must be maintained and safeguarded. Pursuant to resolution 53/27 adopted at the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, it is more than desirable that the new millennium be celebrated in Bethlehem in peace and reconciliation among its peoples, and thus we will be safeguarding the spirit of Christ and his eternal message of peace. It is in this way that we will all be contributing in a spirit of joint effort and mutual concession to foster and promote the process of peace in the Middle East, in this region of immense potential but which has been criss-crossed throughout centuries with so many fissures and fractures that make it unstable and therefore hamper its future.

Senegal joins its voice to those of others from all corners of the world to launch an appeal to international financial institutions, the donor community, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, as well as all spirits of goodwill to mobilize the necessary funds for the achievement and success of the Bethlehem 2000 Project.

To conclude, on behalf of the President of the Republic of Senegal, President Abdou Diouf, allow me to wish this Conference every success. This preparatory Conference for the Jubilee commemorating the second millennium of the birth of Jesus Christ will be a precursor for a frank and sincere dialogue among the peoples of this region.

H.E. DR. AZEDDINE LARAKI
Secretary-General of the
Organization of the Islamic Conference

Allow me at the outset to express profound thanks and appreciation to all the parties which are contributing to the success of this important international project. Special thanks go to the Italian Government for hosting this Conference and extending support to make it successful. I also express thanks and appreciation to the United Nations Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for its effective effort in support of the project, which comes within the context of United Nations activities and its special committee as well as a permanent United Nations obligation towards the cause of Palestine, on the basis of respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international and humanitarian law.

I would like also to express thanks and appreciation to the persistent and fruitful efforts of the Committee in support of the cause of the Palestinian people and their just rights. We confirm our joint cooperation aimed at realizing these noble objectives.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference has endorsed the peace option, supported the will of the international community in this respect and adopted resolutions at the summit level to promote a comprehensive and durable peace in the region. Despite Israel's non-compliance with implementing the signed accords, immobilizing the peace process; and its continuous attempts to repudiate the essentials and reference of the peace process, and waste away its contents,

we have exerted enormous efforts to boost and protect the process. We have supported the steps undertaken by the Palestinian side in collaboration with several concerned parties, namely the United States sponsor and the commendable efforts of President Clinton which crystallized in the Wye Memorandum. In spite of all this, the Israeli Government did not respond to these efforts but immobilized the peace process and did not implement its commitments under the Wye Memorandum.

These Israeli policies and attitudes have resulted in the current serious situation and the total deadlock of the peace process on the Palestinian track as well as on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. They have also resulted in a state of general tension pervading the area. There is a risk of this situation developing into all-out chaos. The world has expressed extreme concern and requested the Israeli side to change its policy and attitudes, abide by the essentials of the peace process and implement the concluded agreements.

The five-year transitional phase, according to the Palestinian-Israeli accords, will expire on 4 May 1999. It is high time that the international community, out of a commitment to international law and to the service of peace, should bear its responsibility and exert concrete pressures on Israel to implement the agreements and resolutions on establishing a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, in order to serve peace, security and stability at the international level and not in the Middle East area only.

The Bethlehem 2000 Project, initiated by the Palestinian National Authority to commemorate the beginning of the third millennium of the birth of Christ in the City of Bethlehem in Palestine, constitutes an important international event for the Palestinian people, the peoples of the region and the peoples of the entire world, in view of its religious, historical and human significance. This initiative constitutes a symbol of peace among human beings and of tolerance and coexistence among the adherents of all divine religions. We hope that this event will be a major factor in ushering in a new era of dialogue and détente among the people of the area and a motivation for further economic prosperity and support to the Palestinian people.

The resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 November 1998 concerning the Bethlehem 2000 Project is good proof of the support of the Project by the international community, which considered the world celebration of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem a symbol of common hope in establishing peace among the peoples of the globe.

The outstanding place of Jesus Christ, Son of Mary, and his Mother in Islam is known to all. Christ has brought in a message of love and peace among human beings and called for worshiping Almighty God. In the chapter on Mary, the Holy Koran narrates the story of the birth of Christ, the Spirit of God. The Mother of Christ, Miriam daughter of Imran, occupies an outstanding position in the hearts of Muslims. The Holy Koran also narrates the story of her birth and growing up. She is considered one of the women of paradise.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference pledges its support to this important international project and deploys all its capabilities to make it successful. We would like to emphasize in this context the necessity of ensuring every kind of support to make the project a success, as well as the necessity of having the Israeli occupation authorities remove all obstacles, and allow the free movement of all citizens, of all faiths, to and from Bethlehem so as to be able to participate in this important international event.

We are of the view that this international manifestation is yet another occasion for persistent action to restore peace to the land of peace, to boost the Middle East peace process and abidance by agreements concluded within its framework, especially implementing all the items of the Wye Memorandum signed between the PLO and Israel, so that the peace process may achieve its desired objectives, of restoring the national rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to return, to self-determination and the establishment of their independent State on their national soil, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as their capital.

H.E. MR. IBRA DEGUÈNE KA
Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the
Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and on behalf of all the personalities present here, I have the immense pleasure to thank Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic, for having accepted our invitation to participate in this Bethlehem 2000 International Conference. We also wish to thank H.E. Mr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, as well as the Italian Government, for having welcomed us here in Rome and for having provided the necessary support for this important Conference.

I should also like to express our profound gratitude to H.E. Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO, who generously assisted us in preparing for this Conference and made his Organization's conference services available to us.

We also wish most particularly to thank Cardinal Roger Etchegaray for the support provided by the Holy See in the preparations for this Conference.

"All roads lead to Rome", as the saying goes. It is only fitting, therefore, that we should all have come here, to the "Eternal City", to support the Palestinian people and celebrate the message of Bethlehem 2000. Rome, the centre of many international activities, is also, for us, a permanent symbol of culture, religion, tolerance and of a dynamic civil society. Rome prides itself on being the place where many religions exist side by side and prosper. Its many churches, synagogues and mosques form an integral part of the city's rich cultural and spiritual tapestry. I should like to thank Mr. Francesco Rutelli, the Mayor of the City of Rome — one of the world's most beautiful and most glorious cities — for the warm welcome that has been extended to all the participants in the Conference.

I would like, lastly, to express my profound gratitude to all the representatives and special envoys of Governments, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society who have come to take part in this meeting. I bid all of them welcome to the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference.

For hundreds of years, the history of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, has inspired the devotion of believers of various religions. The message of Bethlehem is a message of love, tolerance, reconciliation and universal peace. In the course of time, Bethlehem has become a torch of hope and comfort for the millions of pilgrims who throng there to pray and draw strength from a spiritual renewal.

The commemoration of the second millennium of the birth of Jesus Christ is, in our view, of great historical and cultural importance, not only for this Palestinian city and for the Middle East, but also for the international community. The sublime message of peace that Christ proclaimed 2,000 years ago has a more profound resonance than ever today. This message is addressed to all of us, whatever our beliefs, race, gender or national identity. This message constitutes a fundamental aspiration of humanity. Does not your presence here today testify to your belief in the universality and permanence of the message of peace that emanated from Bethlehem?

The commemoration of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ also marks the end of the second millennium and the advent of the third. Today, therefore, we must express the hope that these millennium celebrations in Bethlehem will pave the way for a new era of dialogue, peace and reconciliation, for Palestinians, Israelis and all the peoples of this region, a crossroads of history and of the world.

On the occasion of this historic event, the Palestinian Authority, thanks to the vision and leadership of President Yasser Arafat, has launched the Bethlehem 2000 Project, which involves cultural activities to mark this unique moment in the history of mankind.

The Project also aims to restore and reconstitute the rich heritage of the city — squares, streets, holy places and numerous relics — for the benefit of its inhabitants and of the pilgrims of today and tomorrow. It will also serve to modernize the basic infrastructure of Bethlehem and to improve its tourist facilities. All this work will contribute to ensuring the best possible welcome for the millions of visitors expected in Bethlehem and to revitalizing the city's economy.

At the United Nations Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, held at Brussels in February 1998, President Arafat had expressed the hope that this great religious and historic occasion will mark a new departure for our world and for the whole of mankind, the beginning of an era of love and peace, and that it will open a new chapter in the rich history of the Palestinian people.

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People has responded to the appeal to support this initiative and it has made every effort to sensitize the international community to this Project.

At the Committee's request, the General Assembly decided to include an item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of its fifty-third session.

After a rich debate, the General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution calling upon the international community as a whole to increase its support for and commitment to the Bethlehem 2000 Project to ensure the implementation and success of the project.

The present International Conference highlights the efforts being made by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People to draw the international community's attention to the importance of this Project, which holds out great hope.

The Committee has invited the representatives of Governments, parliaments and intergovernmental organizations, of various religions and cultures, and of civil society. We thank you for having responded to our appeal and ask you to join in commemorating this historic event and thus reaffirm your support for the objectives of the Bethlehem 2000 Project and proclaim your solidarity with all the peoples of the Middle East in their ardent desire for peace at the dawn of the third millennium.

In conclusion, allow me from this rostrum to urge Israelis and Palestinians, and all the peoples of the Middle East, to join together and do their utmost to ensure that the sacred message of Bethlehem becomes a reality for the present generation and for the generations to come. For Bethlehem must continue to be the place where the present and the future meet, a place for imagining a future full of promise in the economic potential of the peoples of the region.

For all these reasons, I express the wish that our work over the coming days will be fruitful and geared towards concrete results.

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People strongly hopes that the Conference will make it possible to mobilize further the support of the international community for the Bethlehem 2000 Project.

MR. JACQUES DIOUF
Director-General
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

I should like to welcome you on behalf of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. FAO considers it a privilege to host such an important meeting for the success of the Bethlehem 2000 Project, which deserves the broadest support by the international community.

Bethlehem, a thrice Holy City, revered by the faithful of three revealed religions, is a true symbol of peace and reconciliation, not only for the Middle Eastern region, which has suffered so much from rivalries between people, but for the whole world. In this sense, helping the inhabitants of Bethlehem to celebrate the year 2000 in communion with the whole world in a spirit of fraternity between peoples will be a means of mobilizing goodwill everywhere. It is a special opportunity, not to be missed, which can constitute a significant stage on the path to peace in the region.

This is to say just how important the message conveyed by Bethlehem 2000 will be for the future of mankind, and how much it deserves a joint international effort to ensure that it is heard all over the world.

I should like on this occasion to give the most formal expression to FAO's support for this initiative. It is a Project that it feels great sympathy with in several respects. The Organization is engaged in a daily struggle to strengthen international solidarity, with a view to creating the necessary conditions ensuring that every human being enjoys the most fundamental human right, the right to food. All initiatives which, like Bethlehem 2000, are intended to mobilize good will on behalf of the universal values of peace and solidarity between people to ensure that every individual can live in dignity only strengthen FAO in its constant effort to free mankind from hunger and malnutrition.

The misfortunes sadly affecting the fate of over 800 million people suffering from malnutrition in the world, depriving them of any hope of a better future, call for the mobilization of all the components of society and of new forms of solidarity, as advocated by the World Food Summit, which was held here in November 1996. Since then, like the Bethlehem 2000 Project, FAO has endeavoured to mobilize all the components of civil society as a way of backing government action. In this connection, I am doubly happy to welcome the representatives of parliaments, religious institutions, international governmental and non-governmental organizations and associations of all kinds, which are nowadays indispensable to the success of any global initiative.

There is one further reason, of a symbolic nature, why FAO feels in sympathy With the town of Bethlehem, and that is that its name, which in Hebrew means the house of bread, is so close to the organization's own motto, *Fiat Panis*.

The decision to make Bethlehem into a meeting-place with a view to enhancing the values of fraternity, understanding and solidarity beyond all differences, is a signal which mankind needs more than ever before and which we must all support.

It is therefore with a great deal of interest that FAO will be following your work, for which I wish you every success.

H.E. MR. LAMBERTO DINI
Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic

I should also like to welcome you to the Conference for the presentation of the Bethlehem 2000 Project.

Keeping a watchful eye on events in the Mediterranean and the Middle East is obviously one of Italy's fundamental concerns. And this is even more true today, as a responsibility of one of Europe's largest countries. And also in view of Italy's geographical position. But it is also a political commitment, ever since the Venice Declaration of June 1980 which marked a turning point in the European Community's attitude to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Today, more than ever before, we have to endorse the expectations and hopes on the southern borders of our continent. Italy's position in the Mediterranean, which might have been a factor of fragility in the cold war period, is now a source of strength. The rediscovery of geography is particularly important at a time when globalization is being so strongly advocated, and integrated areas and economic regions are being established, straddling national borders.

In this spirit, Italy refuses to look on passively and intends to play an active role in the changes that are occurring today in the Mediterranean area. Jointly with its European partners, Italy firmly believes that any fair, lasting and global solution to the Middle East conflict must be based on the principles enshrined in Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) and in particular the return of the occupied territories in exchange for peace, and Palestinian self-determination, with all that this implies, without excluding the possibility of creating - through negotiations - an independent Palestinian State.

Today's meeting is significant because it is taking place at a crucial stage in the peace process. As we all know, this process has been suspended because of the forthcoming Israeli elections. I have no doubt that the outcome of the election will strengthen the determination to create a lasting peace, based on the principles of mutually beneficial coexistence, principles which are largely based upon Jewish thought.

We do not have much time left to complete the final stage that still separates the parties striving for peace, to control a glorious historical heritage which can sometimes become suffocating, and to forge destiny following reason rather than passion.

After months of stalemate, we believe that the Wye Plantation Memorandum can further peace and reconciliation, by a withdrawal of Israeli troops from large areas of the West Bank, while enabling negotiations to begin on the sensitive issues relating to the "final status" (Jerusalem, refugees, water, borders, etc.).

But we must register our concern that the implementation of these accords has been suspended. We have to renew our staunch backing for the parties involved to resume implementing the agreements, and to refrain from any unilateral action that might hamper the path to peace. It is essential to remain within the safe borders of the principles proposed at Oslo as guidelines for the negotiations. We believe that the pace of these negotiations must be hastened.

Peace is the only rational objective towards which to strive. Peace must inspire the values that both parties are anxious to defend. Peace must be the motive force for overcoming the difficulties that still exist, and the differences that still separate the parties. Peace must help define the objectives of each side, and the means by which these objectives can be attained. Peace must guide all the actions taken by friendly countries, and all the encouragement they are able to offer to move beyond this truce, which is always a precarious truce.

I believe that it is necessary not only to promote peace but also to prepare the way for peace. The European Union — and we were the first to recall it in this period in which the Union is beginning to work on a common foreign and security policy — must equip itself with a fully comprehensive strategy for the Mediterranean and for the Middle East. The European Union must lay down the terms for its work around the Barcelona process, which will take a decisive step forward in April this year in Stuttgart. It must promote a project for regional integration which will not only project its interests but also its own methods to the other shore of the Mediterranean.

Italy intends to encourage whatever progress is possible in implementing the agreements that will be concluded, also at the technical level. It will do this by a commitment to the sensitive issues on the negotiating agenda regarding the final status of the territories (Jerusalem, water, refugees and borders), and by supporting the Palestinian economy and implementing the scheduled infrastructure work on the West Bank and in Gaza.

The United Nations Conference to present the Bethlehem 2000 Project, here in Rome, therefore takes on particular practical importance, as well being extremely important in symbolic terms.

The Italian Government wishes to express both appreciation and thanks for the invaluable part played by the United Nations system and by the Committee chaired by Ambassador Ka, to promote the exercise of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

We must recognize that an enormous amount of effort has been invested by the Committee to support the Bethlehem 2000 Project set in motion by the Palestinian National Authority. The underlying objectives of this commitment — which also includes the decision to organize Preparatory Conferences in Brussels, firstly, and now in Rome, which we deem a great honour — are fundamentally important to the Palestinian people. For we are convinced that the Project is intended to make a contribution to the economic development of Palestine by encouraging tourism and defending the cultural heritage, and also to make a substantial contribution to the political stabilization of the area. Guaranteeing freedom of movement and access to the holy places by followers of all religions, and by people of all nationalities is an equally important contribution towards the hoped-for strengthening of inter-ethnic and interfaith dialogue in the Palestinian region — dialogue which, all too often, has been unsettled during the course of this century in what is one of the most ancient crossroads of humanity.

Italy reiterates its desire to offer the Palestinian people the maximum economic assistance. Evidence of this desire can be seen in the contributions that our country has already offered, under bilateral development projects and programmes, and by contributing to the master plan for the Bethlehem 2000 Project being implemented through the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Not to mention the other commitments undertaken at the Brussels Conference last year for road infrastructure work, and the protection of the cultural heritage.

We are well aware that the history of Arab-Israeli confrontation dates back centuries, into what is both a tragic and a glorious history at one and the same time, a history that has brought Jews and Arabs together, and to conflict, which has left its mark on their lives even during the present century. We believe that the conditions now exist for both sides to realize that this conflict is often a contest between two sets of rights. But war is not an inevitable instrument of identity and survival in this conflict. What is necessary, however — and this is the spirit of today's event — is to rediscover the most noble aspirations rooted in the history, culture and religious traditions of all the parties involved, dating back centuries.

From this meeting, the method of equity and justice will emerge strengthened and enhanced, together with the determination to ensure that politics is governed in the best possible manner. With the greatest mutual respect, united in the desire to jointly manage a coexistence which in the past has too often tragically seen one side pitted against the other, we must allow ourselves to be guided by a sense of proportion, not the power of resentment.

The idea of living together must prevail, the idea of the price that every freedom must pay to other freedoms in order to avoid precipitating war.

H.E. MR. YASSER ARAFAT
Chairman of the Executive Committee
of the Palestine Liberation Organization
and President of the Palestinian Authority

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to His Holiness Pope John Paul II for his gracious patronage of this great religious universal historic event, and for the efforts exerted by the Vatican in support of the preparations for the great event of the millennium celebrations in Bethlehem.

Kindly allow me to express my thanks to the friendly Republic of Italy, its President, Government and people, for making it possible for us all to meet here in the Eternal City of Rome — this city which has always been supportive of the Palestinian people and which I have had the honour of visiting many times.

I would like also to thank the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for hosting this Conference on the Bethlehem 2000 Project, and to the Chair and members of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in appreciation of the support that they have been according the Palestinian people to help us attain freedom and independence.

Last but not least, I would like to convey my thanks and greetings to this great gathering of international leaders, important figures, representatives of diplomatic missions, religious leaders, representatives of international non-governmental organization and private institutions, who have come here to share with us their views and to enrich our experience with their advice and opinion, thus contributing in preparing the City of Bethlehem, the city of Our Lord Jesus Christ, peace be upon Him, for the advent of the third millennium of the Nativity.

It gives me a great deal of happiness to be with you today in this Conference which is dedicated to the Bethlehem 2000 Project, which we consider a Palestinian project of international significance, and which because of its religious, cultural, and historic dimension has been endorsed with the support and blessing of the international community and all our brethren and friends. This Project is dedicated to celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Messenger of love, forgiveness and peace.

On this occasion, I extend my gratitude to the international community which expressed its support for the Project through voting in favour of the United Nations resolution adopted in its fifty-third session. The General Assembly called in that resolution for increasing assistance and participation of the international community as a whole, including private-sector participation, to ensure the success of the Bethlehem 2000 Project, and requested the Secretary General to mobilize the pertinent international organizations and agencies, and to increase their efforts for ensuring the success of the Project. It also stressed a very important matter, the need to ensure free and unhindered access to the Holy Places in Bethlehem to the faithful of all religions and citizens of all nationalities.

We look forward to seeing a wide international participation in these important religious historic celebrations because such participation will have a profound religious effect that would reinforce the culture of peace and deepen the feelings of love and forgiveness in everybody and provide a new foundation in the Holy Land (Terra Sancta) for the peace project that our people are working hard to realize, the peace of the brave, that would ensure justice for all and peaceful life to both the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples, and to all other peoples in the region, to our children and theirs.

This peace, which the world has realized, is achievable only through the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination and the establishment of its independent State with Al-Quds Al-Sharif (Holy Jerusalem) as its capital, will be our contemporary message to history and the future.

From Bethlehem, as of the first moment of the third millennium, we shall send a call of peace for all the peoples of the world, a call for security to all the peoples, and a call of the dedication of all efforts and resources for building and development instead of violence, occupation and conflict.

Bethlehem is one of the most important places in history where the interaction among religions and world civilizations can take place. This city, which is now free under the Palestinian National Authority, is in a race with time in order to erase the traces of Israeli occupation from one of the most beautiful and most ancient cities in the world. Therefore, we have determined to make the year 2000 a year of revival for Bethlehem, this great city of ours and yours, within the framework of the national revival and development of Palestine, the region and the world in general.

The revival of Bethlehem and Palestine will be stronger with your support and help.

We await and will welcome and greet the multitudes of pilgrims, visitors and tourists who will be coming to Bethlehem from all over the world and who will build a bridge of permanent relationship between us and the rest of the world.

Our celebrations, which will last for 16 months, from December 1999 to April 2001, will not be limited to the religious, cultural, and artistic local and international events, but will involve holding international conferences and forums for dialogue among the living cultures in order to make Bethlehem a centre for building bridges of understanding and peace, not only in our region but also for the whole world.

While we imagine the new image of Bethlehem in the year 2000, we see it as a bright model for a new Palestine - a free Palestine. From this vantage point I would like to call upon and appeal to you all to provide your increasing support to our religious and historic international project, namely, the Bethlehem 2000 Project, so that we may enter together the third millennium — this millennium that honours the memory of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we can make Bethlehem a more beautiful city and a more beautiful country in general.

Our dreams of the future are great and numerous. They are legitimate dreams. They are dreams that can be realized. I came to you from the Holy Land, the land that has been deprived of peace for many decades. At this moment I remember my partner in the peace of the brave, the late Yitzhak Rabin, who paid with his life as a price for his belief in the peace of the brave. I have committed myself to continue in the path of the peace of the brave irrespective of the difficulties and the obstacles, remembering the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem:

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you."

What I am worried about is that some are operating against peace, trying to handicap the peace and freeze the agreements. What I mean here is that the Israeli Government unjustifiably hinders the peace process and intentionally tries to return to the pre-peace practices and methods. The share of Bethlehem from such sufferings has been considerable. The city was under curfew many times and people were banned from entering or leaving it.

Furthermore, what is worse is that it has been surrounded with settlements in and around Jerusalem. I think none of us doesn't know that the "Abu Ghneim" settlement encircles Bethlehem, in order to absolutely isolate it from its sister, the Holy City of Jerusalem, and to devoid it of its civilized, historical and vital features.

We are painstakingly working to create the possibilities for the millennium celebrations. We also dream of making such celebrations the starting point of a peaceful future and a clear-cut coexistence.

From this vantage point, I would like to call upon the international community to increase their efforts to extract the status quo in our area from its difficult situation, particularly after this community has shown its ironclad and corporate tendency to save the Middle East peace and oppose the Israeli policies which aim at freezing this peace, the peace of the brave.

We must, once again from the Holy Land and from the whole area in general, send the eternal evangel of love, coexistence and cooperation, the evangel of right, justice and peace.

It is highly significant to see 115 States voting in favour of this tendency, with only 2 against it. In effect, it is an international vote against occupation, settlement and subjugation, in favour of rights, justice and freedom for the Palestinian people, for Palestine and for construction, development and peace in Palestine.

Finally, I would like to wholeheartedly invite you all, your countries and your peoples to visit Palestine, the Holy Land, Bethlehem, the Holy City of Jerusalem, our liberated towns and lands and those looking forward to liberation. You will be entertained by the grand sons of the divine religions, by the sons of our people who have been honoured to be the custodians of the Christian and Islamic holy places and who have never shown any bit of negligence towards their service or maintenance, entertaining visitors and making their best efforts to protect and defend them.

You are invited to visit the Holy Land of Palestine, which was and has been the centre of all religions and cultures and which deserves to be the capital of peace and the starting point of its spread worldwide.

III. PLENARY I

CELEBRATING THE NEW MILLENNIUM IN A GLOBAL VISION OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

H.E. MR. SAID KAMAL
Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States

I am happy to be joining you today as the representative of His Excellency Dr. Ahmed Esmat Abdel Meguid, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, and am glad to convey to you his greetings and his approbation of the efforts you have made to convene this important international conference in preparation for the Bethlehem 2000 celebration in Palestine.

Your meeting today is a genuine and concrete expression of the positions you have maintained in support of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and a confirmation of your commitment and that of your countries and organizations to promote the values of justice and peace introduced by the revealed scriptures and enshrined in the constitutions of civilized States and the charters and statutes of international organizations. At the same time, your gathering also gives voice to your support for the efforts of the Palestinian National Authority, as represented by its emblematic leader, President Yasser Arafat, in his endeavour to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East and promote the values of tolerance and love preached by Jesus Christ from the Holy City of Bethlehem in order to counter evil, injustice and aggression. I must take this opportunity to thank, on behalf of the League of Arab States, all those who organized this conference — countries, organizations and individuals. Our gratitude goes to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for sponsoring and organizing the meeting and to the Government of Italy and the FAO for their hospitality.

The League of Arab States shares your interest in the Bethlehem 2000 Project as a natural extension of its long-standing interest in the question of Palestine over half a century. It understands, as you do, the extent to which the Palestinian people has suffered under occupation, and it is monitoring in particular the expropriation of land and the neglect of infrastructure and administration in Palestinian cities and villages and the economic, social and psychological harm done to their inhabitants. The damage caused will not, I think, be remedied merely by the elimination of occupation but will endure for years to come. Much effort and considerable resources will be required before towns and villages return to normal and then, after refurbishing and reconstruction, catch up with others of the civilized world. Despite its status as a Holy City, Bethlehem has not been spared the consequences of the occupation but has suffered in the same

way as Jerusalem and other Palestinian cities while they await the achievement of freedom and peace around them before receiving their due in terms of development and reconstruction and before they regain the exercise of the historical, cultural and religious roles that they merit.

The Palestinian National Authority has done well in launching the Bethlehem 2000 Project and capitalizing on the advent of the third millennium after the birth of Jesus Christ in this Holy City in order to advance the worthy objectives and ideals that He Himself preached. I shall not dwell on the development goals of this important Project, despite the hopes pinned on the repair of the city's infrastructure, major buildings and institutions in preparation for the event, or on the celebrations themselves as an instrument of economic development that we hope will long continue and long benefit the city and its inhabitants. More important than this are the political, cultural and moral dimensions of a unique Project in a unique city such as Bethlehem.

The League of Arab States knows from its experience in the Palestine issue and in the Arab-Israeli conflict that our region needs peace and stability, and it knows at the same time that the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace requires, alongside the political and legal components, a heightened spirit of tolerance and justice, such as that for which Jesus Christ called from this hallowed ground in the Middle East.

Despite the wrongs suffered by Palestinians and Arabs because of the Israeli occupation and its consequences, the Arabs chose the path of peace and took part in the Madrid Conference. They are full of hope that the other party has achieved the same peaceful outlook so that Palestine will once again be a land of tolerance, justice and love. After the signing of the Oslo agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Israeli Labour Party Government, hopes for peace were revived and a dawn of justice and stability was about to break for Bethlehem and all other Palestinian towns. After only a few years a rightist Government came to power in Israel in June 1996, and it most regrettably proceeded to pursue policies inimical to peace and to evade the commitments given by the previous Government. It resumed a policy of settlement and of violence against Palestinians and deliberately placed obstacles and snares in the path of the Palestinian National Authority, and this threatened to return the region to violence and instability. Fortunately, the world still has advocates of peace such as yourselves, and powerful and influential States made the effort required to deter the Israeli Government from intransigence and prevarication. With a dedicated effort by President Bill Clinton, the United States succeeded in convening the Wye River talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and in having a memorandum signed in October 1998 concerning the implementation of the commitments, previously entered into, and the launching of final-status negotiations. But while the Palestinian side hastened to meet its obligations under the Wye River Memorandum, the current Israeli Government resumed its manoeuvrings, invented excuses and pretexts for suspending the implementation of the Memorandum and fixed 17 May 1999 as the date for early elections in Israel that may block the peace process for months to come after the two previous years of deadlock.

Since the hope of establishing peace in the Middle East first materialized, the Secretariat of the League of Arab States has been focusing its attention on reconstruction and development in Palestine. It has included "The economic and social situation in Palestine" as a standing item on the agenda of its Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, and this is discussed twice a year at the Council's sessions. Local and international efforts for reconstruction and development in Palestine and the improvement of the economic situation and repair of the Palestinian institutions destroyed by the occupation over a period of more than 30 years are also reviewed at those sessions.

Guided by the resolutions adopted by the Council of the League, the Secretariat cooperates with States, international organizations and private-sector agencies with a view to mobilizing support for the Palestinian National Authority and its reconstruction and development programmes. These efforts have been fruitful and have produced positive results in some sectors, and we are continuing our endeavour to expand pan-Arab participation, which we regard as a patriotic and moral duty if the League is to carry through its historical commitment to the Palestinian cause.

I take this opportunity to thank those institutions that have shown that they are well prepared to cooperate with us in this field, especially the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research and the International Labour Organization, as well as the donor

countries and organizations that have continued to support the Palestinian economy as an essential component of peace in the Middle East.

I also thank the business sector in the Arab States, which is endeavouring to lend increased support to the activities of the League Secretariat, especially as they relate to the Palestine issue.

From the moment it was announced, the League of Arab States sensed the importance of the Bethlehem 2000 Project. Its interest in the Project took on a concrete form when His Excellency President Yasser Arafat appealed to the Arab States to support it and contribute to it in an address he delivered at the League headquarters in May 1998.

Some Secretariat bodies began to explore ways of strengthening Arab participation. At its sixty-third session, the Permanent Arab Committee on Information adopted a recommendation to the effect that Arab information media should undertake to foster and promote such participation and that the Arab States should take part in preparations for the celebration. At its fifty-eighth session, held from 1 to 7 November 1998, the Committee on Programmes for Arab Students in the Occupied Territories of the League's Palestine Department recommended, on the basis of a proposal by the Syrian Arab Republic:

> " ... that delegations to the Committee should, at its next session, submit their ideas on the preparation of programmes relating to the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the third both for the enlightenment of young people in the occupied homeland and to provide correct information on the Arab character of the Palestinian territory to the millions of pilgrims and visitors. We shall thereby capitalize on these historic occasions by advancing the Arab cause, this being particularly appropriate since many Arab countries had a direct historical role in the life of Jesus Christ."

At its sixty-first session, held from 7 to 14 February 1999, the Arab Conference of Officials in Charge of Palestinian Affairs endorsed the efforts of the League Secretariat to promote the Bethlehem 2000 celebration and urged the Arab States to participate in this great international event. That recommendation was welcomed by other institutions of the League, and it will be submitted to the Council of the League at its March 1999 session for the adoption of an appropriate resolution along the lines of that adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

When the Secretary-General of the League received an invitation to the present conference, he welcomed the opportunity to participate and wrote to member States through their permanent representatives urging them to consider the Project and to submit proposals so that, when the celebration activities began, there would be constructive Arab participation in keeping with the historical links between Palestine and the other Arab countries and with the special character of the League's association with the Palestine issue.

The political circumstances affecting the Palestinian territory, including the City of Bethlehem, will have a direct impact on the success of the Project and the achievement of its objectives. There are great hopes for your sustained efforts over the coming months and for a decision by Israeli society in favour of peace and for the creation of conditions in which our region can enter the third millennium having achieved peace and security for all of its peoples. That way, Bethlehem 2000 can be a celebration of peace in the land of peace.

I thank you, and I wish your conference success.

HIS BEATITUDE MSGR. MICHEL SABBAH
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

This meeting brings us together around the City of Bethlehem, for it was here that the event we will be celebrating in the year 2000 took place, 2,000 years ago. Our thoughts today will focus first on the mystery of God and then on the reality of man in Bethlehem, in his arduous search for justice and peace.

The mystery of God is presented to the faithful as a means of delving ever deeper into God's divine work: it elevates human nature and restores it to the peace of God. It is the mystery of God's relationship with man that all the year 2000 celebrations provide an opportunity to contemplate, both for those who believe in God and those who do not. For 2,000 years means not only time gone by, but a new period of time yet to go by. The content of this time is the divine, which has agreed to be contained within its limits and to be the object of our intelligence and our senses, as St. John says in his first epistle:

> "Something which has existed since the beginning,
> that we have heard,
> and we have seen with our own eyes;
> that we have watched
> and touched with our hands;
> the Word, who is life;
> that is our subject.
> That life was made visible;
> we saw it and we are giving our testimony,
> telling you of the eternal life" (1 John 1, 1-2)

The year 2000, which centres on the entry of God's Eternal Word into human history, through the mystery of the Incarnation, makes possible our meeting with God, in our many and diverse efforts to build up, which represent as many struggles with efforts to tear down. In the prologue to his Gospel, St. John speaks of this meeting between God and mankind in the following terms:

> "In the beginning was the Word
> "And the Word was with God and the word was God
> "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us
> "And we beheld his glory" (John 1, 1.14).

This is the mystery, which the Great Jubilee and the great event we are commemorating in the year 2000 ask us to reflect upon.

After the mystery of God, and rather in the light of this mystery, it is the reality of the human situation in Bethlehem today that draws our attention at the threshold of the year 2000.

"A Jubilee is always an occasion of special grace, 'a day blessed by the Lord'", Pope John Paul II said in his Apostolic Letter "Tertio Millennio Adveniente" (At the Threshold of the Year 2000) (para. 32).

It is a time of grace for the world, a time of special grace for Bethlehem, which badly needs it. A number of Christians still live in Bethlehem, a number that is falling, because of the general political, economic and social instability found there as in the rest of the region. The number of Christians is declining, and this basic fact causes concern to everyone: the Palestinian National Authority, the Catholic Church and other Churches alike. Everyone would like to see Christians continue to live in the place where Jesus was born. This will depend, however, on the situation — peace or conflict — which can be achieved in Bethlehem and in the region as a whole. This is the responsibility of political leaders and an international community committed to the peace process.

The reality of the human situation in Bethlehem is harsh and difficult: daily life, achieving full freedom, work, sickness insurance, education, the children's future and the temptation to emigrate. This is a spiritual and moral struggle which is being waged on a daily basis in Bethlehem. It is impossible not to see that reality, as the entire world turns its gaze towards Bethlehem in the year 2000, and as we meet today to reflect together on this city. At the threshold of the year 2000, the poor in Bethlehem are many; there are many who suffer from the lack of peace. In addition to the various projects being planned, and which may relieve the suffering of many, the concern for peace and for the families working hard to survive in Bethlehem must be given high priority.

The world will come to Bethlehem to see the past and to meditate on the mystery of God that took place there. It will also witness the mystery of the inhabitants of Bethlehem today, whose situation is a sign, a warning and an invitation to delay no more in restoring justice, equality and the peace which will provide security for all, to usher in a new period in the history of the region, a period of abundant peace and mutual trust.

It is with this vision and in this spirit, before the mystery of God and before the reality of human life in Bethlehem today, that the Palestinian national celebrations will be held in Bethlehem and throughout the world, and that the religious celebrations of each Church and the ecumenical celebrations will be held. There is an abiding hope, born of faith and prayer, that the ecumenical spirit among our different Churches will go beyond the stage of friendship and brotherhood that prevails among us today, thanks be to God. We have an abiding hope to grow in this spirit and to began a truly ecumenical march in the direction of greater unity, less status quo, less living in the past, more living in the present and greater attention to the challenges of the present. We will remain faithful to all aspects of our rich ecclesiastical traditions, we will make of them a common spiritual sustenance that will help us fight together, as brothers, and enable us to help build the earthly city, which needs those who pray as much as it needs those who administer and govern.

This vision also requires us to have greater openness among religions, here again an openness that goes beyond mere good relations towards a deeper reflection on our role as Christians, Muslims and Jews in our society, a society struggling to achieve peace. What is required is an interfaith dialogue in the place where God wanted the three monotheistic religions to live together, in which each one will participate, remaining true to his own faith but at the same time opening to allow a clearer vision of others; a dialogue which has its role to play in achieving peace. Religion and the words of religious leaders always have an influence on the people and on the course of events. But this common word has not yet been uttered: it has not yet been found. It needs to be found. This is why Bethlehem 2000 invites the monotheistic religions living in the Holy Land to speak out, so that a new life may begin throughout the region and for all religions.

Religions, or rather their followers, have caused many conflicts and wars throughout history in the name of religion. Today, in the name of a religion that is better understood and better experienced, religious leaders have the responsibility to change the behaviour of the faithful. They have the responsibility of opening a new path for themselves and for their followers, in order to guide the world towards greater peace and to bear witness to the true value of religion and God's unique appeal to mankind: God the creator of all, who wants the good of all. He is our model: the one who believes is the one who imitates God the Creator and loves all his creatures without distinction.

Bethlehem 2000 brings us together to reflect on our duty towards Bethlehem and towards mankind. Two thousand years ago, the angels in the sky of Bethlehem announced the coming of a Messiah to save all mankind. The angel told the shepherds, and through them mankind: "Fear not", meaning, first of all, the release from the fear which is an integral part of every human life, and of our life in Bethlehem today: "For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people: for unto you is born this day a Saviour which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2, 10-11).

In Bethlehem the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). This is the role of us all: to render glory to God in the service of man, so that, throughout the world and especially in Bethlehem, God's will, God's justice and God's peace may be manifest and become a reality.

REV. DR. JOAN BROWN CAMPBELL
General Secretary of the National Council
of the Churches of Christ in the USA

To be in Rome is always a privilege. As a Christian, it is to be in the city of the catacombs and the Vatican. It is to be reminded of both the danger and the grandeur that is our heritage. It is to visit again the city of Da Vinci and Michelangelo — art and science that now belong not just to the faithful but to all those whose lives are enriched by art and beauty and informed by science.

It is with a great sense of pleasure that I stand before you this afternoon to speak about the new millennium. By some, this auspicious event has been referred to in a lighter tone, sometimes called "millennial madness". As irreverent as this may sound, there is a ring of truth to it. Self-declared prophets stand on street corners and predict the end of the world. Computer wizards warn of massive failure and my young grandchildren, listening to their warning, ask their parents about stockpiling water and food and, oh yes, videos and books, and, could they bring a friend over during that period?

In our country, where Christians are in the majority, for those who do not call themselves Christians, there is an unspoken and whispered fear that the celebration of the year 2000 will be a time of Christian hegemony and dominance. In parts of the world where Christians are in the minority, there is a fear that the meaning of the millennium and its profound significance for the faithful will be buried beneath an avalanche of tourism and secular expressions. But for all, the year 2000 will be a significant marker. Bethlehem 2000 will offer us an opportunity to celebrate. But in its poignant way, it also reminds us of the age-old conflict. We in the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA have — and have had, throughout the years, — close ties with the Palestinian people. We have worked and prayed for peace and justice. The millennium offers new opportunities to continue this struggle.

As Christians we must follow the message of Jesus: do justice; release the captives; feed, house, clothe the poor; visit and heal the sick; and to all, grant tender mercy and walk humbly with our God. This message joins us to all the faithful by whatever name and whatever deity they worship. This message joins us to people of good will and common purpose everywhere. For Christians, the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus, whom Christians worship as the Son of God, serves as the occasion for both rejoicing and for profound reflection on the meaning of that event in our own time and throughout the intervening centuries. Jesus, the man of humble origin, born of a woman, a birth which took place among cattle and beasts of burden in a stable, lived a life of obscurity until he took up his earthly ministry, healing and preaching the word of God. Jesus' miracles are well known and the man Jesus is recognized as a prophet by Christians and Muslims alike. As is the way with prophets, Jesus was killed for blasphemy, crucified in disgrace. Nonetheless, He has been become without dispute one of the most historically influential persons ever to have lived. For a large part of the world, even the passage of the years is measured by his life. One could view this history as a story of triumph, of a defeated figure with a small following, who refused to stay buried, and through a miraculous reversal of fortune becomes the source and inspiration for men and women from all nations throughout the ages. This is reason enough for a millennial celebration. But this is not the whole of the story and any serious millennial event must also acknowledge that the followers of the God/man Jesus all too often have failed to live up to his greatest teaching — that we should love one another.

The history of Christianity is not only one of triumph but one of tragedy as well — a story of human beings afflicted with arrogance and sin, corruption and despair. It is nothing new to decry the sins of the past but they dare not be ignored lest they be repeated. There was in history a small group of disciplined followers of Jesus prepared to suffer even death rather than do evil, but there were also those who turned this simple and profound truth into a religion identified with a mass society and State power and with all the attendant compromises and corruptions. Two thousand years of the veneration of the name of Jesus have also meant centuries of accommodation to unjust, oppressive and exploitative systems of wealth and power, to war, persecutions, slavery and violence, to hostility and to aggression against those of other faiths. In this, Christians have not been unique; in fact one of the humbling realities is that wherever firm beliefs are held, both prophets and pirates emerge. This dichotomy exists in every faith and in unfaithful people. Unfaithful people have tended to resemble one another to a remarkable degree. Thanks to God, this is not the whole story; there has been much of goodness, holiness, the sublime and the beautiful, but there should not be a Christian in the world who does not view this history without profound humility, deep contrition and sincere repentance. Joy in the message of Jesus cannot but be recognized by the way watered by tears.

Thanks to God, the meaning offered to us in Jesus does not transfix our gaze upon the past, where events and deeds are forever fixed and unalterable, incapable of being undone and redone however one might wish. The dramatic moment of the beginning of a "new millennium", with its expansive vision of the sweep of time, offers us all anew the persistent challenges of peace, justice, reconciliation and the gift of the unity of the human community — what Martin Luther

King, Jr., referred to as the "beloved community". We stand now at this threshold and never before have we been so well placed to accept the challenges before us.

The process of globalization, whether of the movement of capital or of culture, has brought people of every faith and culture into face-to-face contact around the world in an unprecedented way. The media, so often intrusive in our lives, do nevertheless acquaints us with one another's problems. The United Nations itself is one of the most concrete examples of an international community seeking peace and justice, and on its best days, it is successful. Among religious believers everywhere, the encounter with those of other faiths has raised the issue of deliberate dialogue in the search for mutual understanding and common ground to a level of the highest priority, a matter not for scholars and academics, but as an urgent matter of daily living. It is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for any group, even a nation of religious believers, to define itself and its life apart from persons of other faiths. We have come to live with and to learn from one another. Sensitivity and respect require that we should take all — every person — into account. Therefore, the observance of the year 2000 has a Christian character but is not uniquely Christian in the sense that it affects only Christians. The Palestinian people, through the efforts of Bethlehem 2000, have sought to recognize and to celebrate this character. Jesus Christ lived and lives among us as a man for all, and his universal message has been one of justice for the oppressed, hope for the downtrodden and, finally, peace, all-encompassing, everlasting peace, which comes to us both as a result of our own strenuous efforts and finally as a gift bestowed upon us from God above.

As the leader of an organization that represents literally millions of Christians in the United States, I would like to address a word as well to the faithful Christians of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth and the other places of the Holy Land whose names are forever incorporated in our memory as children and in the story of Jesus for every Christian in the world. Through our ecumenical partnership with the Middle East Council of Churches, and through the many ties that bind the churches one to another, the National Council of the Churches of Christ has long known and loved them as a living link to the very foundation of our faith. The Holy Places are important to us, but even more important than places and buildings of stone are the communities of faithful witnesses who live and bear the name of Christ in the place of His earthly ministry, His death and His resurrection. The church is the body of Christ, and where it is present, He is present. We hope and pray that the commemoration of the year 2000, in Bethlehem and elsewhere, will also be an occasion for the renewing and rebuilding of the church of Christ in the land where it was born.

Finally, let me say, as others have said, that the millennium is above all a call to unity. Our future must be an ecumenical, interfaith one, or I dare say we will have no future at all. We must recognize the dignity and worth of every person, treasure it, preserve it and protect it. Faith must be a unifying force, not a divisive one. The common teachings of every faith call us to love neighbour as self, and neighbour is not a geographic term but a moral one, for the world is our common neighbourhood. We shall pray for Bethlehem today, tomorrow and always.

REV. FATHER ARCHPRIEST VICTOR PETLYUCHENKO
Deputy Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations
of the Moscow Patriarchate, Representative of
His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia

I wholeheartedly greet you, representatives of the world community and of the religious national and public associations who have gathered in the old City of Rome to discuss the problems which Bethlehem, the city which was the cradle of the Saviour, is facing on the threshold in the third millennium.

Similarity and interconnection of the events influencing the life of generations which will live in the twenty-first century prompts us to seek common ways and means of resolving the major problems of the present and the future. The present reality opens up broad prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation among representatives of different religions, nations and cultures for the sake of better life in the new millennium.

Bethlehem is a great Christian holy place. The Prophet Micah said about that city: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be the ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic 5:2). It will be here, at the place of the Saviour's birth, that the central celebrations of the coming great Jubilee will take place. Yet the care for the preservation of the holy places of this ancient city and of all its historical countenance must be a task not only of Christians, but of the followers of other religions as well and of all people who love and respect the history and culture of the Holy Land. The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to participate, within its powers, in the implementation of this good task and to cooperate with the Palestinian authorities to fulfil it.

It is necessary to care about this Holy City so that it will forever be a city of peace, prosperity and mutual assistance, which are indeed rooted in the best religious and moral traditions. For that objective it is necessary to develop, with all the means at one's disposal, a dialogue among all nations that live in the Holy Land and to facilitate reconciliation among them and their coming closer together.

I greet you once again, thank you for the invitation to the Conference and wish the blessed success to the forum.

HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL ANBA MOUSSA

General Archpriest and Representative
of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

I am happy to communicate to you the greetings and love of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Missionary Province of St. Mark, and to convey to you the happiness of His Holiness at this blessed meeting for Bethlehem 2000.

Bethlehem is the city of peace, and there the angels intoned a song of peace when Christ the Lord was born. They said then (Luke 2:14): "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Peace is the foundation common to all religions, and indeed Islam also invokes God as "Al-Salam", this being one of His names. God also commended peace to Judaism when He said of Jerusalem (Isa. 66:12): "I will extend peace to her like a river."

Peace is the desire of peoples, families and individuals; and we must all therefore strive for peace. All of us in the Middle East, Christians, Muslims and Jews, are children of Abraham the Patriarch, either by faith or by blood as well as faith. So why should we not strive together for a lasting, comprehensive, just and stable peace? We wish to celebrate the year 2000 in Bethlehem, in joy and good will, but our joy shall only be complete when our Palestinian brothers secure all of their rights and when Israel withdraws from all the occupied areas in the Palestinian territory, including Arab Jerusalem, as well as from the Golan in Syria and from southern Lebanon. We call upon Israel not only to hand over the occupied territories and comply with the agreements but also to abide by the spirit of peace. Peace is indeed a spirit and not mere agreements.

Security is the offspring and outcome of peace, and peace is the natural result of justice. Thus Shimon Peres has recently been saying that an independent Palestinian State is better for Israel.

God readied you, President Arafat, and He has preserved you for the sake of the Palestinians. You have emerged unscathed from many battles, then from the plane crash, then from hospitalization. We pray to God to guard you so that you may achieve your goal of an independent Palestine.

We urge Israel not to alter the geography or the demographic structure of either Jerusalem or the occupied territory.

Come, let us strive together for a spiritual, political and economic Bethlehem 2000 so that Bethlehem may rejoice after decades of suffering. "Bethlehem" means "house of bread"; so come, let us support it with all we can muster.

We also await the day when we shall enter Jerusalem with our Muslim, Arab and Palestinian brothers, when it is liberated and has become the capital of Palestine. This is the compact His Holiness Pope Shenouda III has made with you, and he remains committed to it.

You know, dearly beloved, that the Holy Family visited Egypt, spent more than two years there and invoked blessing on the country from the north to the south and from the east to the west. I should here like to thank President Hosni Mubarak, Dr. Beltagi, Minister of Tourism, Mr. Amre Moussa, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and our Egyptian Government. The Government has readied the places associated with the Holy Journey to serve as tourist sites for those coming for the year 2000 celebrations. This is an indication of our national unity in Egypt, Muslims and Copts, and we reject any foreign interference in our affairs.

Come, let us strive for peace; let us forget what is behind us; and let us reach for what is ahead, as the Gospel says.

Come, let us make our lives better. I thank you all.

HIS EMINENCE THE METROPOLITAN OF SWITZERLAND,
DAMASKINOS PAPANDREOU
Representative of His All Holiness Bartholomew,
Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

It is an honour and a joy for me to represent, here, His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolomew; he has asked me to transmit to you his blessing and his cordial wishes for the success of this important meeting, which is being held in Rome under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People to support the Bethlehem 2000 Project launched by the Palestinian Authority.

The international conference devoted to the theme "Bethlehem 2000" is an important initiative of the Committee, and it comes at a very important time for the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people and also for the prospects of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of the peoples in the Holy Land, which has always been a symbol of hope for overcoming the divisions of the world.

It is in Bethlehem that the holy choir of angels was heard singing about hopes of restoring universal peace on earth, having the glory of God shine forth throughout the world and ensuring the assistance of men inspired by God's heavenly peace: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

It is in Bethlehem that heavenly peace was made incarnate and became not only the sublime model for the reconciliation of man with God and with his fellow men, but also the eternal light of universal hopes for peace, social justice and respect for the sanctity of the human being.

It is in Bethlehem that the limits of space and time were transcended, causing universality to be experienced in the sanctity of the place and eternity to be experienced in the grandeur of the moment.

It is in Bethlehem that the light of hope has continued to shine for thousands of years — sometimes bright and sometimes faint — lighting the way towards peaceful coexistence for the peoples of the world, even though there have been long periods when passing difficulties have clouded men's reason, triggering tragic explosions of blind fanaticism or religious intolerance.

It is towards Bethlehem that all eyes are turning now, at the dawn of the third millennium, in hopes of seeing the light of peoples' hopes for more peace, social justice and respect for human rights, irrespective of national, racial, religious or other discrimination of any kind.

And yet, in our days — as has occurred in earlier times — religious confrontations or racial conflict between the peoples of the region are tarnishing the eternal symbol of hope for peace, social justice and brotherhood among men of good will. Peaceful coexistence for the people of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), who have been living together in the Holy Land for centuries, has been jeopardized by the painful memories of the past and by the arbitrary opportunism of the present. Thus the genuine content of these peoples' religious conscience is being hidden from view and their aspirations for peaceful coexistence are constantly being tested.

Religions no longer reflect heavenly peace on earth in the Holy Land and they, in their own way, are helping to fan the dreadful flames of religious intolerance and fanaticism, which sully the vision of peaceful coexistence of peoples throughout the world. While it is true that religions cannot, on their own, prevent the many conflicts from growing more bitter, they can play a decisive role and thus help stem religious intolerance and foster a climate of peace and genuine cooperation among peoples of different religious faiths.

The teachings of the three monotheistic religions contain all these fundamental elements, which clarify for each religion the spiritual content of its mission; that mission is to encourage the faithful to live together peacefully in the same region and to genuinely respect the religious freedom of followers of other religions.

Only thus can the spirit of peace, which was born in Bethlehem, become the highest symbol of peaceful coexistence between people, not only in the Holy Land of Palestine but throughout the entire world. This spirit of Bethlehem must prevail during the third millennium so that the holy places may cause heavenly peace to shine perpetually on earth, in an unbroken mystagogy of prayer and brotherhood among the faithful of the three religions.

The Orthodox Church, which has had the highest profile in the holy places for 2,000 years, fully recognizes that these places are places of pilgrimage for the entire world and that they cannot simply be the object of the unilateral interests of local communities, whether national or religious. The status of the holy places as regards pilgrimage has triggered bloody conflicts at various times over the ages — for example, during the Crusades — and led to sharp confrontations, even between Christian churches.

The traumatic experiences of the past concerning this status compels us to approach any new suggestion — such as that made by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 53/27 of 18 November 1998 — in a circumspect and a constructive manner so that the spirit of Bethlehem is not dispelled by the latest opportunism or by demands prejudicial to the established and indefeasible rights of the peoples and religions in the holy places. The interest which the international community has shown will cause the peoples of Palestine to live together peacefully and will ensure that the international community has access to the places of pilgrimage, provided that the following conditions are met:

First, the historic, established and indefeasible rights of the peoples and the faithful of the three monotheistic religions must be respected; these rights will have to be confirmed and protected by international guarantees.

Secondly, the status of the holy places as places of pilgrimage must be respected; this status was established following lengthy struggles and it cannot be revised in response to unilateral claims or opportunistic designs with the backing of international organizations. If that were to happen, it would trigger a further cycle of religious confrontations, including between Christian churches.

Thirdly, religious freedom for the faithful of the three monotheistic religions, each of which has indefeasible religious rights with respect to its own places of pilgrimage, must be internationally guaranteed, as must freedom of access to these respective places for pilgrims from all over the world.

Fourthly, international guarantees must be provided to determine, once and for all, the principles of peaceful coexistence for the people of Palestine (Palestinians, Jews, and so forth) with the agreement of the nations and religions existing in the region, including the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

H.E. MR. MOHAMMED BIN NAWAF BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD
President of the Islamic Cultural Centre, Rome

I have the pleasure of conveying the greetings of the Board of the Islamic Cultural Centre at Rome, which is supervised and maintained by the Muslim World League, to the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, the sponsor of this important event, which the Secretary-General of the United Nations hopes will provide a valuable opportunity to develop dialogue and cooperation for the achievement of peace and reconciliation among peoples throughout the world.

Peace and reconciliation are two of the noblest human objectives.

Peace is a name which Almighty God attributed to Himself and to which He commanded his Prophets to guide all mankind in their conduct and in their mutual interests, dealings and consultations. God, in His mercy, sent a messenger to every nation to guide them along the paths to peace, to remove anything that might disrupt human coexistence and to disseminate teachings that advocate love, reconciliation and peace.

The history of the prophets in the divinely revealed scriptures testifies to the complicated and difficult circumstances in which the revelation of the truth led to the quest for, and the triumph of, peace. In the words of Almighty God, "If they incline towards peace, you should do likewise and put your trust in God".

Those who believe in true peace, based on the equitable treatment of peoples and recognition of their right to live in security, independence and dignity without pressures, injustice, discrimination or privileges, are guided by the aim of the divinely revealed messages, which is undoubtedly that peace and justice should prevail on earth and among mankind in the light of a torch from Almighty God which was conveyed by His Prophets and Messengers together with clear signs that are all around us and to which discerning people are not blind.

We are meeting here at the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference to celebrate the second-millennium anniversary of the birth of the Messiah the son of Mary (on whom be peace) at the place which God has blessed by enabling it to witness the anniversary of that glorious birth which once again impelled mankind, with a hitherto unprecedented impetus, towards the path of Almighty God, the straight path, the path of guidance, the path of the righteous Prophets and Messengers since the creation of mankind. That birth was a sign, indeed the greatest sign, from Almighty God insofar as He chose an immaculate virgin to bear a son who carried within him part of the spirit of God and part of His mercy and compassion towards mankind, a son who spoke within hours of his birth to say that he had been blessed by Almighty God to convey His word, guide His creatures and suffer, for the care of his mission, more than any earlier Prophets and Messengers had suffered until he was faced with death and Almighty God retrieved His trust from mankind and raised it up to Himself. That was Jesus, the son of Mary, the Word of Truth.

That happened 2,000 years ago. Jesus, the son of Mary (on whom be peace), was, and still remains, the wonder of the age on which people have differed and the word of Truth which they have disputed. However, Almighty God ensured the triumph of His Word, fortified it against assault and consecrated it in another message a little over six centuries later. Almighty God also wanted to establish peace among His creatures, the followers of the two messages. Some acted in accordance with His wish by establishing extremely close and noble relations at the beginning of the mission of the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him salvation) at the dawn of Islam. Was this not illustrated by the shelter that the Abyssinian Christians accorded to the first Muslims who fled from the tyranny of the unbelievers and idol-worshippers at Makkah to the oasis of faith under the protection of the Negus (Emperor of Ethiopia)? That was the first migration by Muslims, who understood their religion as being a confirmation of Almighty God's earlier revelation and a corroboration of the content of the books of all the Prophets and Messengers.

Almighty God clearly defined the nature of the lofty relationship between Muslims and Christians in the holy verse: "You will find that the persons most friendly to those who believe are those who say 'we are Christians' since some of them are priests and monks and they do not adopt an arrogant attitude."

This is the close friendship that prompted the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) to give an undertaking to the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem under which their churches were safeguarded and protected, their freedom of worship was guaranteed and the Muslims were prohibited from harming them. In accordance with this undertaking, known as the Covenant of Umar, which the Caliph of the Muslims gave to the Christians, Muslims and Christians lived as neighbours and helped each other in all aspects of their life in common. The clergy of Jerusalem (the City of Peace) have testified that their churches and the churches of their forefathers in that city have never been subjected to harm or harassment of any type during the 14 centuries since the appearance of Islam.

Islam established a basis for coexistence among divinely revealed religions in accordance with the words of Almighty God say: "People of the book! Come to a just judgement between us and you — that we worship none but God, that we associate none with Him and that none of us take others for lords beside God"; and: "We have divided you into peoples and tribes so that you may know each other. The noblest of you in the sight of God is the most pious." In the words of the Messenger of Islam, "No Arab can be superior to a non-Arab except in terms of piety". The Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him salvation) did not view piety solely as the various forms and movement of worship; he regarded good deeds as being more meritorious. When his opinion was sought concerning a man who was totally engrossed in worship, even during the night, he said: "Any one of you is more worshipful than him."

So how should we act?

How should we, Muslims and Christians, work together in order to be honoured in the sight of God? We should work, dear friends, in the spirit of brotherhood that Almighty God desired when he created us all equal. We should pursue this policy without violating it or derogating from it in any way on the pretext of meeting the needs of society and progress, including the need to develop and protect States and promote their interests. The achievement of a noble aim cannot justify the use of an ignoble means. We should act justly and remove the injustice that Almighty God has prohibited. As stipulated in the divinely inspired Hadith, the removal of injustice and the prevention of its occurrence are religious duties. This applies in private life and should also apply in international political life.

The basic concept underlying the establishment of the United Nations was the need to ensure respect for the principle of equal rights for all, to maintain international peace and security and to develop cooperation and dialogue among nations and peoples. These lofty and noble aims form part of the essence of the divinely revealed sacred religions. However, the people of Holy Jerusalem are suffering from the calamities of persecution, degradation, expulsion and usurpation, as are the people of Kosovo and other peoples. The international community therefore has a divinely ordained duty to save these persecuted peoples from the depths of their torment and to ensure that they are treated justly so that they can enjoy peace of mind concerning their present and their future.

In accordance with its well-known positions on the question of human dignity, Islam is firmly opposed to enslavement, internment, exile, punishment, physical or mental torture and any form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Islam teaches that the dignity of all human beings should be respected, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, ideological or religious affiliations.

This is the peace to which both Islam and Christianity aspire. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Muslims of the East are not less familiar with the essence of Christianity than many Westerners. In fact, the Arab World was the cradle of the Christian message, which played a major role in removing the West from its perilous Dark Ages into the light of faith and civilization. This familiarity was also deepened, many centuries ago, by the close contacts between Islamic States and the West which took various forms and led to a splendid Islamic and Arab contribution to Western civilization.

When speaking of the dialogue to which the Secretary-General of the United Nations referred, mention must also be made of dialogue between Islam and the West. We believe that this should be based on the values derived from the teachings of Christianity and Islam. We disagree with the view that Islam is Eastern and Christianity is Western; they are both universal religions. We cannot disregard the fact that they both originated in the Eastern Mediterranean

and that they are the legitimate heirs of the same cultural and historical heritage and are therefore mutually complementary and in harmony with each other in spite of the erroneous interpretations to which political motives and interests have given rise.

We believe that the need for mutual understanding and cooperation among the nations of the world is now greater than ever before. We are convinced that constructive dialogue is the only way to dispel some of the erroneous concepts that each party has formed concerning the other. It is the only way to change public opinion in the West in a manner consistent with the tolerance that both Christianity and Islam advocate and also with the impartiality and love of truth on which modern civilization is based.

In these difficult circumstances, I can find no better way of concluding my address than by emphasizing the concept of Bethlehem 2000, the cradle of the Messiah (on whom be peace), which is the love of universal peace. We urge you to work with us for the achievement of this peace in defence of Holy Jerusalem, the first of the two *giblas* and the third most holy place, and in every part of the world where injustice and persecution prevail over justice, tolerance and good-neighbourliness.

In the words of Almighty God, "If God finds good in your hearts, He will give you better."

Peace be upon you and the mercy and blessings of God.

MR. DWAIN C. EPPS
Director, Commission of the Churches on
International Affairs of the World Council of Churches

I have the honour to bring you the greetings of Dr. Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, on the important occasion of this Conference organized by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People to mobilize international public opinion in pursuit of the aims outlined in United Nations General Assembly resolution 53/27.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has warmly endorsed and joined in the appeal for the Bethlehem 2000 Project. In his letter to President Arafat on the occasion of the Brussels Participants Conference, Dr. Raiser underscored the attachment to Bethlehem of the WCC and its 330 member churches in some 125 countries around the world, and our commitment to the Palestinian people who call it home:

> We have long supported these "living stones" in affirmation and in deed, Dr. Raiser wrote. For 50 years we have been engaged in support to refugees and displaced persons, the building of significant educational, medical and social institutions and facilities. We have made important financial contributions to Palestinian cultural, economic and social development programmes.
>
> Thus as the end of a century which has brought so much pain and suffering to the Palestinian people draws near, we are acutely aware of the urgent, continuing development needs of Palestine... This is undoubtedly the time for the international community to commit itself also through generous multilateral support for Palestine, its infrastructure and its people. Development and peace do indeed go hand in hand. The Bethlehem 2000 Project has the potential of being a significant stepping stone to a new millennium and a new era of peace in the Holy Land.

Responsible tourism

Long ago, the World Council of Churches recognized that while thousands of Christians belonging to our member churches gained spiritual nourishment and renewal from pilgrimages to holy places or visits to biblical sites in Israel and Palestine, very few such visitors were exposed to the daily life of Palestinian society. Thus, for more than two decades, the WCC has supported, in cooperation with the Middle East Council of Churches, programmes of responsible tourism to the Holy Land to remedy this situation wherever possible. Through such visits, very many Christians around the world have gained deeper insights not only into their faith, but also a greater understanding of the socio-political and faith realities of the Holy Land. New, strong bonds of friendship and solidarity have been established between visiting Christians and their Palestinian brothers and sisters. As a result, many have become deeply dedicated to the pursuit of peace and justice.

We are encouraging member churches to build upon this concrete experience and to participate in the Bethlehem 2000 Project as an opportunity to expand upon and deepen the awareness and relationships which have been established. Recognizing the enormity of the task, churches around the world are seeking ways to assist the local Christian communities in and around Bethlehem in making their own contributions to the success of the Project.

Pilgrimages for peace

Two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, who, Christians believe, was proclaimed by the prophets as the Prince of Peace, the land of his forbears still longs for the peace Jesus taught, peace built upon love and forgiveness. Mistrust and fear prevail between Palestine and Israel. Economic disparity, struggles over control of vital land and resources continue to sow the seeds of animosity, violence and insecurity for all.

A just and lasting peace must be built upon the pillars of:

- comprehensive economic development based on open borders and free movement of people, goods and capital;
- wide-ranging people-to-people contact at all levels of Israeli and Palestinian society; and
- political agreements answering to the national and strategic interests of both peoples.

We remain convinced that there is a will among people in both Israel and Palestine, among faithful Jews, Muslims and Christians, to strengthen these foundations of peace. Sadly, however, Bethlehem risks on this occasion becoming not a universal symbol of peace, but rather a focus of continuing confrontation. Israel's declared intentions to expand the "Har Homa" settlement and to exploit the millennium celebrations at the expense of Bethlehem are deeply troubling.

The Bethlehem 2000 Project should not be seen as a threat or as an invitation to competition, but rather as a welcome opportunity to build strong foundations for peace by narrowing the economic gap between Israel and Palestine. The building of a solid, self-sufficient economic infrastructure for Palestine with its promise of well-being and economic equality for Palestinians should be viewed an opportunity for Israel, a chance for peaceful cooperation.

We therefore hope that tourists, pilgrims, Christian and Muslim Palestinians, Jews and people of other faiths will have free access to the celebrations in Bethlehem in the year 2000, and that this will be a period in which people from Israel, Palestine and many other lands who love and pursue peace will be able to meet and build upon their shared aspirations.

Concluding remarks

It is therefore with these hopes and aspirations in mind that the World Council of Churches again offers its encouragement and support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project. We shall be encouraging Christians from around the world to take this opportunity to visit Bethlehem as peacemakers and bridge-builders, on a pilgrimage of faith, bringing with them a message of love and hope that the message of Jesus the Christ, the Prince of Peace, may be realized in our time.

REV. DR. NAIM ATEEK
Director of Sabeel, Jerusalem

The end of a millennium brings both joy, as well as sadness, expectations, as well as anxieties. It is natural to have these mixed feelings at such a great juncture in the history of the world. For millions of people, Bethlehem 2000 is not a religious celebration. Jesus, if remembered, is only a cultural symbol. The year 2000, therefore, signifies for many the end of an epoch and the beginning of another, an opening for opportunities and a hope for a better future.

The twentieth century has seen greater advancement in science and technology than all the previous epochs of history. At the same time, it has been the most atrocious of all centuries. Scholars tell us that more people have already been killed in war in this century than in all the preceding 10,000 years combined (Wink, 1998. p. 137). It is estimated that approximately 109 million people have been killed in wars and conflicts during this century; more than 50 per cent of them have been civilians.

Many people, therefore, as they stand on the threshold of a new century, would like to take a good hard look at the past and ask serious questions about the state of the world in which we live. Have we as humans provided a quality of life that respects the dignity and humanity of all people? Do we respect the value of all life in our world? From this perspective, the year 2000 is not seen as only a milestone but as a mirror that will help us look at ourselves and at our brothers and sisters around us.

For many of us, Bethlehem 2000 is a religious celebration. It stands for a very significant event in the history of our world. It marks the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is this religious and spiritual event which makes Bethlehem 2000 possible. Furthermore, it is in the light of the person of Jesus Christ, his life and teaching, that we can assess where we are today. For many of us, Jesus Christ is a measure for true humanity. It is appropriate, therefore, as we celebrate Bethlehem 2000 to remember Jesus Christ whose birthday we are celebrating and what he stood for when he was living in Palestine and what he still stands for today.

At the same time, Bethlehem 2000 has a broader significance. It helps us focus on Palestine and the Palestinian people, both Muslims and Christians. It reminds us of the Palestinians who for the last 50 years have been struggling for justice end peace. Bethlehem 2000 opens before us a vista to see the face of Palestinians who long for a secure peace based on justice. Yet as we stand here today, Bethlehem and its vicinity are besieged by Israeli settlements, which continue to expand through the confiscation of Palestinian land. The area of Bethlehem witnesses these days an almost unprecedented attack on its environs by the settlers. As we prepare to commemorate Bethlehem 2000, it is apparent to many of us that many settlers are determined to grab as much land as they can and fragment the area by chopping it into small pieces. One recalls here the words of Israel's foreign minister Ariel Sharon who, after the Wye River agreement, encouraged the settlers to "grab more hills. We'll expand the area. Whatever is seized will be ours, whatever we don't will be theirs" (Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, January/February 1999, p.9).

Recently, Israeli settlers who were heavily armed came with their bulldozers and started uprooting olive and fig trees from the land of the village of Artas, south of Bethlehem, including land of Artas' ancient, historic monastery (see message from Palestinian Legislative Council member Salah Ta'mari on 24 January 1998: "Don't Say That You Didn't Know"). It is not only the settlers that are threatening the Bethlehem area; the Jerusalem municipality is equally encroaching on Bethlehem land. Since 1967, the Jerusalem municipality has been annexing land from the City of Bethlehem (see "How the Jerusalem municipality is absorbing the town of Bethlehem", *Jerusalem File*, November 1998, p. 6). Bethlehem 2000, therefore, has added a critical dimension to the history of the Palestinian people today.

In the midst of so much hopelessness as a result of the stalemate in the peace process and the despair of so many people who see that the crippled peace process lacks the proper ingredients for a just peace, let us focus our attention for the next few minutes on Bethlehem with the hope that we can receive fresh inspiration for a better future. What our world needs today is a new vision for a new millennium inspired by Christ's teachings and life. A vision of hope is needed for the Palestinians, as well as for billions of people who will soon stand on the threshold of the new century with a prayer in their hearts that the future will bring peace and prosperity.

Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem, in a humble setting, by a humble mother, in stressful conditions, and under a vicious foreign rule. When we bring to memory the milieu of Jesus' birth, it reminds us today of Israeli occupation and oppression. Occupation is always brutal and oppressive. There is no humane or benign form of occupation. This helps us remember the oppressed people of the world.

Bethlehem 2000 helps us think of refugees. Joseph, Mary and Jesus became refugees in order to escape the brutality of Herod. There are more than 15 million refugees in the world today, including approximately 5 million Palestinians who subsist poorly and miserably and who live in the hope of return.

Bethlehem 2000 reminds us of the massacre of children at the time of King Herod, who was moved by jealousy and egoism. It makes us focus on the suffering of the innocent. Herod brings to mind people of power who abuse their authority, oppress and brutalize others, and deny them their basic human rights.

Bethlehem 2000 reminds us of labourers like the shepherds who work long hours, in order to provide a decent living for their families. The Holy Family helps us focus on the importance of the family, especially of women and mothers who carry great burdens and responsibilities not only through childbirth but equally in the upbringing of children.

Bethlehem 2000 brings to us some good memories that are connected with the birth of Christ. Although there was no room in the inn, surely there were people who extended hospitality to Joseph and Mary and helped Mary in giving birth. Bethlehem 2000 helps us to be thankful for the goodness in people who act kindly and mercifully. We think of the Magi who travelled to pay homage and respect not to the high and mighty but to a humble and lowly child.

We think of Mary, a young woman who received a deep insight about the nature of God. In her moving song, the Magnificat, she praises and celebrates the almighty God who "has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53). We think of an old man Simeon who gave thanks to God for the birth of the baby Jesus, and who celebrated the gift of life.

When we think of Bethlehem, we think of the angel of the Lord whose message began with the words, "Do not be afraid..." (Luke 2:10) — a message which is desperately needed today. We want the new millennium to dispel the fears of millions of people who need to live in peace and security. We think of chairs and music when we think of the angels who sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). Bethlehem 2000 stirs within us these wonderful spiritual memories.

Behind the Bethlehem 2000 event stands the person of Jesus Christ. When we think of him, we think of a humble man of great integrity and strength. We think of a person who stood with those in need and with the marginalized; a person who refused to compromise the truth and had a commitment to non-violence. Jesus Christ preached love of others, even the love of one's enemy. He critiqued established religion, which emphasized the strict adherence to the law with its rites and ceremonies and neglected the more important basics of justice, mercy and faith. These are some of the characteristics of the person we are going to celebrate in Bethlehem 2000.

Any vision for the millennium must come from the spirit of Jesus Christ — a vision to the wise and learned, such as the Magi, as well as to the simple and common, such as the Shepherds. It is a vision for peace and reconciliation. I believe that today from the podium of the United Nations, and as we reflect on Bethlehem 2000, we can raise a vision to all the people of the world, a vision which can be translated into five paradigms for the new millennium:

1. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us towards ecumenism. Within the church of Jesus Christ, the old paradigm of denominationalism and sectarianism should give way to the paradigm of ecumenism. The last 2,000 years have been marred by divisions within the churches. The first millennium saw the separation of most of the Christians of the Middle East. The second millennium saw the separation between Eastern and Western Christians. For the last 50 years there have been genuine attempts to find reconciliation within the Body of Christ through the work

of the World Council of Churches. The third millennium should mark the reconciliation of brothers end sisters within the church. We need to celebrate the unity and rich mosaic of the church within the diversity of its traditions - Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant.

2. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us to another paradigm, that of religious pluralism. For most of the last 2,000 years, we have witnessed in Palestine the alienation and animosity among the three major religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religion, in our long history together, has been used by people of power as an instrument of oppression and the chasm between us has been deep and painful. In the name of Christ, many Christians, especially in the West, killed and humiliated the other. This is not the Christian faith that we know and the Christ it proclaimed is alien and foreign to us. The Christ of Bethlehem inspires in us respect, acceptance and love of the other. We live today in a pluralistic society, with deep religious allegiances. The new paradigm for the new millennium demands greater toleration and acceptance without compromising one's faith or religion. Peace among religions will inevitably enhance the peace among canons and peoples. The new paradigm of pluralism, once adopted, will create greater communication, cooperation, coordination, and even partnerships among our religions. It will facilitate the joint work on issues of human rifts, the integrity of creation, controlling religious extremism, as well as many other issues.

3. Bethlehem 2000 inspires us to adopt the paradigm of the Jubilee. Jesus Christ emphasized the Jubilee theme in his ministry. Jubilee has to do with economic and political justice and liberation. When Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Nazareth, he highlighted the motif of Jubilee. He read from the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). This is the year of Jubilee, the year in which God demands the liberation of all the people of the land (Lev.25:10).

   Jesus emphasized that God's purpose as creator is for all human relations in the world to be based on justice and love. Yet what obstructs human relations today is the abuse of power. We daily perceive it in the economic exploitation of the poor and the policy of injustice towards the oppressed. At the heart of the biblical Jubilee, which Jesus Christ proclaimed, is equality for all. This equality is not an act of generosity on the part of the rich and the powerful, it stems from God's demand for justice for all. For the God who loves justice always takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. Injustice breeds violence and violence produces insecurity. Without justice there is no peace or security. The new paradigm of Jubilee helps us to focus on liberation for all the oppressed people of the world, especially, in our case, for the Palestinians. Furthermore, it makes us emphasize the importance of economic justice for all, the forgiveness of debts of all the poor countries of our world and the adoption of a simpler lifestyle so that we can care for today's generations as well as future ones.

4. Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, Bethlehem 2000 raises before us another paradigm, the paradigm of non-violence. This century has been the most violent of all centuries in the history of the world. As I have mentioned, above, we have managed to kill more people in this century than at any other time in history. Bethlehem 2000 reflects the spirit of Jesus Christ, who lived a life of non-violence and suffered himself violently at the hands of others. Jesus rejected violence and inspired people to live in peace. Those who live and make peace he called children of God (Matthew 5:9). Inspired by Bethlehem 2000, we hope that the new millennium will eschew war, and never experience it. We need to bury the wars within the twentieth century and strengthen the international will to promote justice and peace through non-violent ways.

5. Jesus Christ was a man of compassion. So much of the world we know is built on harshness and violence. We have become hard and callused. We live in many contradictions and inconsistencies. We bomb and kill people and then turn around and offer them humanitarian assistance. Jesus Christ inspires in us kindness and compassion. He said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). It is this quality that we must aspire to as we move into the new millennium. For most of its history, our world has functioned according to the paradigm of domination. It is due time for the new millennium to shed that and adopt the paradigm of compassion and partnership.

This is, indeed, a new vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation, inspired by the person of Jesus Christ whose birthday we will be celebrating and who has given us Bethlehem 2000. Reflecting on Christmas 2000, Poet Howard Thurman has written:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

IV. PANEL II

PREPARING FOR THE MILLENNIUM CELEBRATION

a) Status of the Bethlehem 2000 Project
b) Meeting needs, facing obstacles, looking to the future

H.E. DR. NABEEL KASSIS
Minister, Coordinator-General of the
Bethlehem 2000 Project Authority

It is indeed a great honour for me today to address this distinguished gathering, and it is a particular pleasure to be able to report to you on the status of the Bethlehem 2000 Project.

Yesterday you listened attentively to statements that put the celebrations of the new millennium in the context of a global vision of peace and reconciliation. Today I will attempt to give you a picture of how we at the Bethlehem 2000 Project propose to conduct the celebration, what preparations we think are needed for that, how far we have progressed, and what is still to be done. I shall do my best to be brief.

Let me start by saying that we believe that the Bethlehem 2000 celebration is not just another celebration of the advent of the third millennium. We view Bethlehem as the source of the millennium and therefore we want to make Bethlehem 2000 the star of the millennium celebrations. The millennium celebrations in Bethlehem are the Palestinian people's celebrations, to which we invite the world to come and join and participate.

These celebrations are intended to give expression to our being a people ... a people that can celebrate in joy and fulfilment... a people that can host the world and share with it something that belongs to all humanity... a religious or historic event of universal significance.

In addition we see Bethlehem 2000 as a springboard for economic development of the district of Bethlehem and for Palestine. We see Bethlehem 2000 as an opportunity for building peace and stability in the region. And we see Bethlehem 2000 as a possible locomotive for regional cooperation in a very important economic sector, tourism.

The case for Bethlehem 2000 is very convincing, and that is why it has commanded your support. Expressions of support came and continue to come in different forms: the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations at its fifty-third session is one important form. The acceptance of very distinguished world leaders of President Arafat's invitation to be on the International Committee of Bethlehem 2000 is another form of support.

But we may not forget the support that came in the form of grants from many countries, or the soft loans extended to the Palestinian National Authority to help us meet the requirements and the cost to stage the celebrations.

In addition, technical assistance from the World Bank, UNESCO, UNDP and many European countries contributed substantially in the preparations and implementation of the project. Contributions from churches, church-related organizations and many towns that are twinned with Bethlehem made many projects possible.

With the help that we are getting and also with our own resources, both material and human, we are intent on building a legacy that would sustain development in Bethlehem far beyond the year 2000.

We wish to add value to our attractive tourism product. We wish to turn Bethlehem into a centre for dialogue where the concerns of the world and humanity are addressed. We wish Bethlehem to be the centre of dialogue on such issues as peace, hope, faith, culture, heritage and environment.

In order to realise all that, we have embarked upon a project that has six components:

1. Infrastructure building

Projects totalling $109 million in building of water, electricity, sewage and road networks as well as solid waste management. This is essential because of the state of negligence that affected Bethlehem and its environs during the long period of occupation. These projects are meant to meet the minimum needs of the district and 67 per cent of the funds needed have already been committed.

We hope that by the end of this year most of the access roads to Bethlehem will be rehabilitated and that the water and electricity supply will be more than adequate to make private investment — especially in the tourism industry — an attractive prospect.

2. Cultural heritage

Bethlehem is rich in its cultural heritage, which needs to be restored. Our plans are to restore the old city core, its streets, alleys, stairs, façades and buildings to make the town more attractive to tourists and to give them a better view of Palestinian life.

Projects totalling $32 million have been designed and $21 million have already been committed covering ongoing projects and projects that are to start very soon.

3. Tourism development

The Programme here rests on these pillars:

- tourism infrastructure (hotels, restaurants, etc.)
- human resources development (tour guides' training), and
- marketing and communication.

This Programme is underfunded and only 20 per cent of what is needed ($8 million) has been committed.

4. Private-sector development

Projects totalling $180 million have been identified. There are commitments to ongoing projects, totalling around $100 million, for the building of hotels, a conference centre, a bus terminal, as well as other facilities.

5. Services

The services that are needed to be operational during the celebrations require upgrading and expansion to cope with the expected influx of over 2 million visitors during the year 2000. A study of the needs has been completed. Funding opportunities are very much available, as nothing has been committed so far. We estimate that $6 million to $7 million will be needed.

6. The events

This is the heart of the programme and everything else can be seen as preparing the ground for it. The celebrations will centre around the religious celebrations organized by the churches. We coordinate with churches to make sure that the religious celebrations and festivities are conducted in the manner and with the organization that befit the occasion. In addition, we are planning cultural events, in which we have invited the nations of the world to participate, and we are planning to have international star events around such themes as children and hope to which we would like to invite the world to attend through television.

We are also planning conferences on such themes as peace, economic development, faith and cultural heritage.

Mention should also be made of the many local events organised by the community.

We have made a calendar of events, a consolidated calendar that contains the events planned by the various churches, as well as the community and special events that I have just described.

International consultants are helping us at Bethlehem 2000 in the area of event management, construction management and the conduct of business and finance.

We have agreed with the World Bank to use their fund structure for funding Bethlehem 2000 projects.

This is the present status of the Project and we are confident that we will be able to deliver to the world something that we will all be proud of.

But we are still in need of help, financial and otherwise. There is still a substantial funding gap. There is room for the various countries to participate in the events, and there is room for technical assistance.

I know that your presence here is an expression of your willingness and desire to support the Project and I assure you we have need for any form of assistance that you can offer.

MR. HANNA NASSER
Mayor of Bethlehem

It is with great pleasure and great sense of respect that I address you today on this special occasion of the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference. Allow me first to extend my deep appreciation to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its cooperation and for hosting this conference. I would also like to thank the United Nations, represented by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, the sponsors and the initiators of this important event. I will not forget, as well, to thank all of you for attending with us today and contributing to the success of this Conference.

Two thousand years ago, in our little town of Bethlehem, a beam of hope shone into the world and history intervened when the Angels announced to the whole world the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, chanting:

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will towards men."

Bethlehem has ever since been the city of great holiness and the cradle of Christianity.

Coming from Bethlehem, I would like to emphasize the importance of this message of joy which dramatically created a turning point in our world as well as in our souls.

The year 2000 marks the anniversary of this miraculous event which is revered not only by the people of Bethlehem and Palestine but by the entire human race. Bethlehem epitomizes the religious, social, cultural and intellectual heritage of all mankind. The renovation of the town and its development is therefore a responsibility, which should be shouldered and shared by the international community.

As we stand on the threshold of the year 2000, the minds and the hearts of all people are directed towards Bethlehem as the groundsite of the second millennium celebrations and for renewal of faith, hope and peace. In order to commemorate an event of such importance, the Bethlehem Municipality had established in August 1995 the Bethlehem 2000 Municipal Committee representing the concerned public institutions, as well as a number of technically capable and responsible citizens who initiated an intensive program of rehabilitation, reconstruction and development of the town and its vicinity.

December 1995 marked the entrance of our Palestinian National Authority to Bethlehem, putting an end to 27 years of harsh Israeli occupation of the city. Bethlehem had witnessed then the first Christmas celebrations in history under the Palestinian flag. Conscious of the significance of this universal event, our Palestinian National Authority has launched the Bethlehem 2000 Project and, in November 1996, formed the Bethlehem 2000 International Committee headed by His Excellency President Yasser Arafat who has given this issue his full support and attention.

To facilitate coordination, the Bethlehem 2000 Steering Committee was established in February 1997 and entrusted with the preparation of a programme of action and with the overview of its implementation

As Bethlehem shall be the arena for the second millennium celebrations which will host a series of religious, cultural and artistic events scheduled to take place from Christmas 1999 until Easter 2001, the Bethlehem 2000 Project aims at renovating the town and its district, upgrading its infrastructure and public services, rehabilitating the old town centres, promoting private investments, activating cultural life, building awareness and mobilizing the necessary support for the year 2000 and beyond.

The Project has four dimensions. The first one is religious, that is, the celebration of the birth of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the eternal word of God, the child who promised peace on earth and good will for all. It is an occasion to renew the message of adoration, love, hope, peace and joy, the values revered in the Nativity.

The second is political. The preparations for the second millennium coincide with the declaration of our Palestinian State, as the interim period outlined in the Oslo accords comes to en end. I would like, however, to state that the ongoing preparations are being executed under very difficult circumstances because of the stalemated peace process, which reflected negatively on the Palestinians owing to the Israeli policy of closure, collective punishment, deliberate delay of further redeployment and hindering any development plan in our Palestinian territories.

The third dimension is economic. The implementation of the Bethlehem 2000 Project should culminate positively on the region of Bethlehem by improving the quality of its inhabitants' lives, increasing their revenues and creating badly needed job opportunities.

The last dimension is touristic. As tourism will form the backbone of the Palestinian economy, the Bethlehem 2000 Project will put Bethlehem back on the tourism map of the world after it was virtually erased by three decades of Israeli occupation during which the rich heritage of the city was subject to extensive neglect.

Work is ongoing within the framework of this Project with the support of our friends throughout the world to rehabilitate the city, host the celebrations of the second millennium and accommodate the large influx of pilgrims and tourists who will flock to Bethlehem in the year 2000.

Bethlehem faces the universal issue of balancing its past with its present and it has to meet the challenge of presenting itself to the world as a model Palestinian city with a unique history. The implementation of the Bethlehem 2000 Project would preserve the old stamp of the city's history while bringing in the amenities of modern living.

I would like to seize this opportunity to express our deep appreciation to all donors who are engaged in this Project, whether Governments or organizations, that rendered invaluable assistance to help us meet our ambitious goals. However, major fundamental changes are still needed to restore the former glory of Bethlehem.

I regret to say that Bethlehem, the spiritual capital of Christianity, has not had the necessary care and support to match its religious value, the matter which I believe deserves the focus of global attention on this historic occasion.

In the year 2000, the past and the future will meet in Bethlehem in a global vision of hope and reconciliation. Considering the short period of time left, I strongly urge all people of good will to lend support to Bethlehem to enable us to implement the rest of the projects, thus contributing to our march towards a Palestinian renaissance and consolidating the Middle East peace process. We are all committed to making Bethlehem a beacon for all mankind, a city of peace and prosperity, and to qualify it to host probably the biggest celebrated event in modern history.

The year 2000 will not be only a year of joy in the hearts of Christians of Palestine but a year of rejoicing for all communities of believers.

May all men and women of good will gather in the year 2000 in Bethlehem in the shadow of the Church of the Nativity, the place where it all started, to usher in the twenty-first century and gain the privilege of witnessing the dawn of a new millennium sharing with us the fulfilment of a cherished dream that is the birth of the Prince of Peace in the land of peace.

MR. NABIL SARRAF
Vice-President
Palestine Development and Investment Company

It is an honour for me to address your conference on behalf of the Palestinian private sector. A special recognition and gratitude is due to all efforts exerted by the relevant parties that made this Project a reality, namely, the Palestinian National Authority, United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the donor countries and the Bethlehem 2000 Committee.

Appreciating the importance of the occasion, the private sector in Palestine contributed and will continue to contribute its share in the efforts deemed necessary for the event following two parallel paths, namely:

1. The role of large and medium-size private corporations engaged in the execution of several infrastructure and other development projects in the Bethlehem area.

   An example of private-sector participation in big projects is the Palestinian public shareholding company, Palestine Investment and Development Company (PADICO) which, in association with other investors, is involved in building a five-star, 250-room hotel, with an estimated investment of $45 million that will incorporate the historic building known as the Jasir Palace at the entrance to the City of Bethlehem.

Another example is the multi-storey bus terminal at the heart of the City of Bethlehem, adjacent to the Church of the Nativity. This project has been recently approved and awarded by the client, the Municipality of Bethlehem, to the Palestine Real Estate Investment Company, a public shareholding company.

2. The other path of the private-sector contribution will be through the small entrepreneurs — namely, family business, such as restaurants, souvenir shops, bed and breakfasts, entertainment centres, transport and other similar tourist-related activities and services in the Bethlehem area.

Through these activities the objective of the Bethlehem 2000 Project in making the stay of visitors as pleasant and comfortable as possible may be achieved, thus providing the means and facilities to encourage tourists to stay in Bethlehem beyond the one and a half hours that is the norm at present. Additional attractive packages should be available to encourage overnight stay in the city. This could change for the better the entire shape of the tourism industry in Palestine.

To activate and encourage the small entrepreneurs, we believe that certain measures have to be adopted by concerned authorities:

a) Drawing up an overall plan to guide the small and medium-size investors into the priorities of the various needed fields of investment;

b) Carrying out different seminars and workshops to increase the awareness of the potential of small projects;

c) Encouraging labour-intensive projects and offering generous incentives for firms and companies that apply related training programmes to upgrade standards and live up to the occasion;

d) Creating specialized governmental departments that extend help and advice to the investors to bridge red-tape procedures as the remaining time is very short;

e) Making available soft loans to small entrepreneurs for their new investment or to upgrade their facilities.

In this regard, the private sector acknowledges with thanks to the Palestinian Authority the issuance of the new investment encouragement law and, meanwhile, hopes that the new tax law will pass successfully through its legislative channels.

Please allow me now to say a few words about the activities and enthusiasm of the Palestinian private sector, companies, as well as individuals towards their homeland.

Soon after 1994, hundreds or even thousands of Palestinians came to visit Gaza and the West Bank with the objective of investing in Palestine. During 1994 and 1995, many private and public shareholding companies with relatively sizeable capital were established.

One such example is PADICO, whose share capital stands today at $200 million. To date, PADICO's group is committed to construction of projects, the cost of which exceeds $300 million. Most of those projects are under construction, some already completed. The projects planned for the next five years exceed this figure by far.

PADICO's group participation in building a strong Palestinian economic base goes beyond the above-mentioned five-star hotel into a variety of much-needed projects, which include:

1. Several housing and commercial complexes in the Gaza and Ramallah districts;
2. Four major industrial projects in the north of Palestine (Jenin, Toulkarem);
3. The Industrial Estate in Gaza (first stage completed with all necessary infrastructure and mostly already leased);
4. The Palestinian Stock Exchange in Nablus;

5. Other tourism projects in the Jerusalem area and Gaza beach;
6. The Palestinian Telecommunication and the Cellular Telephone covering all Palestinian territories.

Another field of private-sector investment was in commercial banks which played an important role in strengthening the economy and advancing the development process. This growth is demonstrated clearly by the numbers. In 1994, there were only seven banks operating 38 branches in Gaza and the West Bank. By the end of 1998, this number had grown to 22 institutions operating 100 branches.

The same applies to insurance companies, engineering offices, contracting companies, factories, car agencies and many other sectors.

In an effort to boost and organize their activities, the private sector established Palestinian business associations in Gaza and the West Bank, and also established joint Palestinian European and American Chambers of Commerce. The objectives of those organizations include opening new scopes of activity for the Palestinian private sector in other countries for mutual cooperation in commercial activities, partnership and transfer of advanced technology. Cooperation between local and foreign firms will also activate and utilize soft loans offered by many friendly countries to support the Palestinian economy.

To realize those objectives, members of those associations have been active in attending conferences, workshops, meetings and exhibitions throughout the world. No doubt such activities have been reflected positively in the preparation for the 2000 millennium. It is to our regret, however, that this excellent initial momentum of the private-sector investments is now showing a drastic slowdown.

As you are well aware, this unfortunately is attributable to the stagnant peace process and the continued delays in the opening of the Gaza airport to the Arab and foreign airlines, activating the safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank, the start of the building of the Gaza harbour, and above all, we expect the Israeli side to ease the granting of the necessary permits and ensure safe passage for Palestinian and Arab expertise needed by the Palestinian private sector.

We therefore call on the international community to exert extra pressure on the Israeli side to force the peace process forward and hence create a more stable investment atmosphere. We are confident that real progress on the political front will pave the way for additional Palestinian and, hopefully, further foreign investment.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the private sector in Palestine, small and large, will shoulder its responsibilities in full if given the right tools that are needed to carry out its duties.

At this juncture, please allow me on behalf of the private sector to extend our thanks and gratitude to the organizing committee of this Conference.

MR. VALDO SPINI
President of the Parliamentary Association
of Friendship Italy-Israel

I am very glad to be invited to speak to you in my capacity as President of the Parliamentary Association of Friendship Italy-Israel. The first president of this association was the current President of the Italian Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro.

In this capacity, I welcome the initiative of Bethlehem 2000 as all the initiatives directed to peace and dialogue in the Middle East. Peace starts in our conscience, in our souls, in our characters. Here in the Mediterranean region, we have a particular responsibility — the responsibility of demonstrating that our peoples, the peoples of the three monotheistic religions — Jewish, Christians (i.e., Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox), and the Muslims - can live together

in friendship, pluralism, cooperation and peace. Pluralism is very important in all religions as a protection against all temptation in every religion of integration and intolerance.

I retain as one of my most impressive souvenirs the fact that in November 1993, I was asked — as Director of the Italian Ministry of Environment — to be chairman in Jerusalem of a round table about a crucial issue on water and the environment in that area and in the region. That was one of the first meetings that took place between Israelis and Palestinians before the Wye Plantation agreements. In a certain sense, I think that the problem of water and the need to have more water for development can be a meaningful example of how much we have to cooperate. It also shows what role a country like Italy can play to further the capability to make peace concrete by diffusing and enlarging the possibility to enjoy the environment and the natural resources of that area — peace for resources. There I met again — and for me it was for the last time — Yitzhak Rabin, whom we can really call a martyr of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, in the original meaning of the Greek word "martyr", meaning a witness in the sense of somebody who gives a witnessing of his faith in peace and cooperation.

I want to express also my pleasure at our having here in Rome President Arafat, another participant in the peace process. The peace process is experiencing a difficult period. Notwithstanding this, we have to declare solemnly here that there is no alternative to peace and to the complete respect of all the peace agreements in which all the parties are engaged. There is no alternative to peace. The affirmation of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people is firmly connected with the peace process, with a peace which is just, secure and stable for everybody. But there is also no alternative to peace and security for Israel.

Italy can and should have a special role in the peace process, in addition to the role of Norway in implementing the Oslo agreements. But Italy, because of its position in the Mediterranean, can and should have a particular role in the reconstruction and economic development of the area. We Italian politicians must recognize consciously and deeply that we have this special responsibility. Peace must be defended but should also be accompanied by economic success in order to gain the support of the population involved — economic development for everybody, in particular for the Palestinian population. There is no peace without justice — as the prophet Jeremiah said in the Old Testament.

I wish your initiative success. We are engaged in friendship with one of the parties involved. We feel very connected with the peace process and we want to attain all the objectives that peace may grant to us. I want to finish with a reference on pluralism. This is an important principle in our lives. Everything must be interpreted in a pluralistic sense in order to comprehend the Christian world. The objective is that the three monotheistic religions of the Mediterranean region — Christianity, Judaism and Islam — should be able to live together, into the next century, the next millennium, to open a new page of peace, justice and mutual understanding for the benefit of the spiritual and economic development of the population in our region.

V. PLENARY III

VOICE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARLIAMENTS: INITIATIVES IN CONNECTION WITH BETHLEHEM 2000

MR. MIGUEL ANGEL MARTINEZ
President of the Inter-Parliamentary Council

When addressing you in my capacity as President of the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which is to say speaking on behalf of the 136-member parliaments of our Union, I want first of all to congratulate the organizers of this meeting for having undertaken such a significant and such a successful initiative.

I want also to thank them for having invited us, to thank them and to congratulate them for their understanding and their flexibility when accepting our suggestion to have the voice of parliaments on the topic of our Conference as a specific point in our agenda. I sincerely believe that in this way our presence here, but even more our further involvement and commitment to the Bethlehem 2000 Project, will appear with a much clearer, a much more definite profile. Moreover, the participation of our parliaments in the project is to be understood as a part of the ongoing process of cooperation between the IPU and the United Nations, and even as a means to fill with concrete, tangible content the agreement which was subscribed several years ago, precisely for the joint work of the United Nations and our Union.

In this connection, I find it relevant to spend two or three minutes in order to bring to your attention how that process is going on. Actually, a concept, or even a doctrine, has been taking shape and making considerable progress: as a result of the two main features of the current momentum of mankind's civilization, namely democratization and globalization, the idea of parliamentary diplomacy is developing as an indispensable tool for safeguarding peace and for promoting social progress.

As a matter of fact, parliamentary diplomacy means above all the unavoidable responsibility, which more and more national parliaments do undertake to play an influential and a coordinated role in the field of international politics, that is to say a field which until quite recently was the exclusive endeavour of our respective Governments.

Within a democratic perspective, being the legitimate and the pluralistic representatives of our peoples, but also being the instrument which civil society articulates for its own management there where the rule of law is respected, parliaments have understood that must become actively involved in international affairs; the more so if one realizes that almost no national issue can be tackled any longer in an effective way without taking well into consideration international factors which intervene and affect it.

This awareness and this concern is particularly important at a moment in which we all face the challenge of replacing the world order based on bloc confrontation which has been overthrown and building an alternative to it: a world order which will be better, more balanced, more just, more stable, more democratic and therefore more peaceful.

It is in the face of such a challenge and in assuming our share of responsibility for it that parliaments and their IPU have reacted and stressed strongly that the required new world order is to be one in which the United Nations and its system will play a much more significant role, a much more influential one, one in which it will need much more recognition, much more respect, much more support and much more financial means to be made available from our countries, from our societies, from our public opinions... and naturally also from our institutions.

This also means that the United Nations and its universe must open up in a process of democratization, in a much more ambitious way than what has been attempted so far. In our opinion, the most radical change has to be the growing presence and concrete participation of parliaments in the activities of the United Nations.

This is the goal which we are targeting — probably a long-term one — with the cooperation process undertaken by the IPU and in connection with the United Nations. It is a matter which has been already formally debated in the General Assembly and which remains alive on its agenda; and to which strong support has been given, without exception, by the international community. It is also the sense of the formal agreement signed by the United Nations with us. Two things have appeared in a very clear way: this is no power struggle led by Parliaments against any one. It is a fight for democracy and for a stronger United Nations. It is a fight for which we need to convince and gain more and more friends, not to provoke, not to shock; not to create enemies or add difficulties. And further, one has to understand that under such premises, Parliaments — and their IPU — cannot any longer play as "observers" or "witnesses"... We are an essential part of the State structures, and therefore our presence is required as full actors whenever our States have anything to say or anything to do, very much in all that regards the United Nations and the international affairs.

In any case, a whole process is on its way until we shall succeed in introducing the foreseen parliamentary dimension within the United Nations bodies and activities. By the way, the IPU, as such, feels able and ready to assume the responsibility of becoming such a dimension, and we are aware of the fact that significant changes will have to be accepted by our Union in order to adapt and to be able to play such a role. The next steps are already prepared, leading to a conference called to take place in New York in the year 2000. It is a conference for which, again, unanimous support has been granted by the General Assembly, a conference where the presiding officers from Parliaments of all countries in the world will come to stress in a solemn and firm way that Parliaments have an unavoidable responsibility on the international scene. I hope that they will also adopt the Re-foundation Charter for the IPU to be able to act as we want when entering the twenty-first century.

My friends, it is precisely at this moment and at the current state of affairs that we are called to your Bethlehem 2000 Project. We are most pleased about this invitation, first because it fits in 100 per cent with the concerns and with the priorities of the IPU, and also because it should be a significant concrete opportunity to further and fruitfully develop our Union's cooperation with the United Nations. We are also pleased that the voice of the Parliament is not only that of the IPU but also that of some of the Speakers of Parliament who are also deeply involved in preparing our Conference for Presidents of all Parliaments of the world scheduled for the year 2000.

Let me state, first of all, that we do not regard the Bethlehem 2000 initiative as a minor project; on the contrary, we believe that it should be given the highest importance. Then, I should like to contribute a few remarks on how we regard and understand the Project and on how we think that Parliaments and the IPU could bring to it some significant and specific input.

My comments about the Jubilee may seem a bit more dry than those from other participants in this meeting; of course I beg all of you to understand that it is not my intention to upset anyone. I mean just to be absolutely sincere when expressing our opinions. Actually each one of us is somehow the product of his own personal background; I am not a religious man and perhaps this allows me best to approach religion and religions with great respect, but also perhaps in a more objective way than those who regard this phenomenon as a member of one or another religion.

Having said that, and with full friendship to all and having listened carefully to previous speakers, I want to stress that in my knowledge of the role of Christianity along history and across geography — along 20 centuries and across all 5 continents — probably like the role of other main religions, is a role with a mixture of light and shadows. Christianity has contributed to civilization with inputs for freedom, for equality, for social justice, for progress and for peace. But on the dark side of the contributions, there is also quite a lot of coverage given to tyranny, to social injustice, to gender discrimination, to intolerance and to war.

This certainly belongs to the past and it should be left to historians or to theologians who will study, describe, explain and justify best how and why things happened as they did. My approach to the Bethlehem 2000 Jubilee is a different one, must be a different one. It will be that of a committed political leader who speaks on behalf of all parliaments and therefore of all peoples: men and women; Christians and non-Christians, religious and non-religious. On behalf of all of them, I feel free and empowered to say that we are facing a celebration, which we may — and therefore we must — articulate and use as a significant opportunity and a powerful instrument to promote peace in a region which — no matter if Jesus was born here 2,000 years ago — has not lived very much in peace for a long time; to promote tolerance in an area which — no matter if Jesus was born here 2,000 years ago — has seen a lot of tolerance and rights developing among the peoples who lived and settled here; to give back the rights to the Palestinians who — no matter if Jesus was born here 2,000 years ago — have never enjoyed the rights they were entitled to just as any other people in the world; and to promote development of a land and of a community which — no matter if Jesus was born here 2,000 years ago, needs it badly as a precondition for democracy to pay dividends of prosperity — a prosperity which is probably the best framework to secure peace, tolerance and rights and to consolidate democratic institutions.

This is how we regard on our side your Bethlehem 2000 Project. Others will deal more with the spiritual side of it. I believe that we should share tasks and commitments. And I am ready to list here what I may accept as our share of those tasks and those commitments.

First, I am willing to have the IPU further participate in your reflection for the definition of the concept and for the implementation of the strategies of your Project. We are ready to participate in any "think tank" or "task force" which you may wish to appoint to that aim.

Second, we are ready to bring the Bethlehem 2000 Jubilee as a priority in all fields of our cooperation with the United Nations and its different agencies and bodies.

Third, what I believe may be the main IPU contribution consists in mobilizing our 136-member Parliaments on this issue. We shall try to make them aware of the importance of the Project and shall recommend to all of them to become seriously involved in the Jubilee, directly and in their own capacity. Perhaps even more relevant will be to mobilize each one of those parliaments so that they strongly pressure and control their respective Governments to give their support for the Bethlehem 2000 Jubilee in all possible ways: indeed, in their action within the United Nations, especially in the upcoming debate in the General Assembly, but also with a firm commitment in favour of peace, and more precisely in favour of the ongoing peace process in the area; in favour of the recognition of all rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to their own national State; and in favour of all initiatives contained and sponsored in the Bethlehem 2000 Project for the social and economic development of the territory. Special emphasis should be placed upon what may be achieved in favour of the project within the resources of a forum such as one on the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation which was launched in Barcelona.

I shall cut short my address here. Once more I want to thank the organizers for having invited us, for having understood that it will be relevant for the success of your initiative — from now on "our" initiative — to get parliaments all over the world involved and committed on this issue. Let me promise you all, in a formal way, that the Bethlehem 2000 Project will be included as a point in the political and in the strategic agenda of the IPU. Moreover, I shall spare no efforts to secure our cooperation and our impulse. And indeed, I reiterate hereby the availability of the President of the IPU Council to accompany your efforts and your endeavours, day-to-day, on a matter which is so challenging for the cohesion and for the actual ability of all of us.

THE HON. LUCIANO VIOLANTE
President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

I bring you greetings from the Chamber of Deputies and the trust and hope that this initiative may attain the purposes it pursues. This, by the way, is not a mere formal opening to my statement because the programme for Bethlehem is not just useful in itself but may also constitute a concrete help for peace. Peace for Palestine is the premise for peace in the Mediterranean. This is not the sole problem in the Mediterranean but it is the mother of all problems and moving towards its solution will be an excellent premise for the possible solution of all the other problems.

The Mediterranean is often looked upon by many European countries more as a threat than as an opportunity. The events in Algeria, the question of Cyprus, Greek-Turkish relations and tension between Israel and the Arab countries justify the concerns people harbour. Nonetheless, only more intense relations among peoples, among parliaments, among young generations, among women, will be able to create a network of civic protection, i.e., protection based on civic values around the Mediterranean which will promote peace and development. The future of Europe, of North Africa and of the Middle East will in fact be conditioned by the future of the Mediterranean. But peace is not something you construct if you do not have development, if you do not have justice. Peace is not born out of the mud of poverty, nor is peace born when people are hungry, when people are uncertain about their future, nor is peace born when injustice prevails and when rights are deprived.

The words have been many down through these years — many indeed — and many of those words have been most useful. But many times we have stopped — one metre away from peace — and then sort of slid backwards. Certainly, we are not at the beginning and it would be erroneous to forget the efforts and the steps forward which have been made. Nonetheless, if we do not find our way out of the labyrinth of words and embark upon the hard pathway of facts, we will

not do our job. I am thinking in particular about two objectives: to ensure full implementation of the MEDA plans; second, to tackle in a constructive way the problem of the zeroing of the debt of poor countries. Both of these objectives could truly offer us the great occasion of Bethlehem 2000. The task of working for the concrete implementation and achievement of these two objectives pertains mostly to Governments. But also parliaments have a specific role to play in this effort.

As indicated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, parliaments have a particular responsibility in working for the achievement of peace insofar as parliaments represent their peoples directly. They are the stewards of the rights of men and have the duty to contribute, to edify, to build up a world in which human beings may fully enjoy civil rights, cultural rights, economic rights, social rights and political rights. National parliaments therefore have a task — the task, having ratified the international treaties, of adopting and harmonizing the national legislation to bolster those structures, institutions or organizations associated with society, which protect and safeguard the rights of individuals, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. The phase which we are now going through is characterized by the end of the cold war and by the upsurge of the phenomenon of globalization. This phenomenon, with the speed of the decisions made at the national level, creates new economic relationships, new social rapports, new cultural institutional contacts, but also raises the problem of the renewal of parliamentary functions in the face of the accelerations imposed upon all of us by modern society. Hence side by side with the traditional and ever-fundamental lawmaking and control activity, gradually developing over the last few years has been a further function to be assumed by parliamentary assemblies. The intensification of encounters among delegations, mutual visits among speakers and exchanges of civil servants for training periods have given life to what is ordinarily referred to as parliamentary diplomacy. Parliaments today are now able to carry out an informal type of activity without claiming to take over what Governments do. It is a preparation for that Government's effort, and the greater degree of the movement on the part of parliaments is expected to assert a rigidity in intergovernmental relations which often turns out to become precious. And frequently, this is the case: agreements stipulated among countries, stipulated by Governments, but agreements which were anticipated by the exchange of delegations among the respective parliamentarians in action for peace and cooperation.

At times, parliaments are really the pathfinders, the pioneers. The Mediterranean region — and Italian Foreign Minister Dini has recalled this — is looked upon with particular attention. I just want to recall that, upon the initiative of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and with the decisive contribution of the speakers of the French, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese assemblies, the indication contained in the final document of the Government Conference of Barcelona of 1995 on Euro-Mediterranean partnership was drawn up; it invited the participating States to construct an interparliamentary dialogue. The upcoming forum, which will see gathered together all the speakers of parliaments of the countries that belong to the Barcelona pact, is scheduled to take place on 7 and 8 March in Palma de Mallorca. In that forum, we will discuss a most important basic document. The document we will discuss lays down, among other things, the institution of a Standing Secretariat among the presidents of parliaments of the Euro-Mediterranean area in order to contribute to relaunching and to speeding up the implementation of the objectives contemplated in the Barcelona Declaration. The Secretariat in particular will promote and consolidate human rights, promote the struggle against drug use, terrorism and organized crime and create a forum of parliamentary women and a forum of young people. A part of the budget of parliaments should be earmarked for these initiatives.

Now, part of the programme of the conference of the speakers or presidents of Euro-Mediterranean parliaments could also be dedicated specifically to Bethlehem 2000. The national parliaments will also have to work hard in this direction. I can assure you that, with regard to my own field of responsibility, all the parliamentary instruments available will be used not only to spread the message about the plan of action but also to request and urge Governments so that through the channels of cooperation, it will put into practice the commitments assumed to finance such initiatives, commitments which were reiterated at the summit of the European Union in Brussels in May 1998. Let me also underline the fact that the Chamber of Deputies very closely follows the peace process in the Middle East, not only within the context of discussions which indicate, in a binding manner, to the Government the policy direction to be followed but also by organizing international training sessions. The next one will concern people from the Palestinian Legislative Council.

SENATOR DOMENICO FISICHELLA
Vice-President of the Italian Senate,
on behalf of The Hon. Nicola Mancino,
President of the Italian Senate

In taking the floor today on behalf of the Senate of the Italian Republic and doing so at this international conference on Bethlehem 2000, I would first of all like to extend a very warm, heartfelt word of thanks to Ambassador Ka, the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. I thank him not only for the courteous invitation extended to the Senate but also and especially for his effective work in favour of peace and fraternity among the people of the Mediterranean. I would like to express in particular my heartfelt gratitude for the very precious work done by the Committee in promoting assistance to the Palestinian people, especially to those who reside in the occupied territories and in East Jerusalem.

One of the most recent results of the activities undertaken by the Committee should be considered the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations, which gathered together last February at a special emergency session. That resolution, in condemning the Israeli policy of settlements in the occupied territories, which is now leading to a practically stalled position in the peace process in the Middle East, once again invoked observance of the norms of international law and in particular the negotiating methods for conflict resolution according to what was set forth by the Geneva Conventions of 1949. A very encouraging signal in that sense was also seen in the resolution on Bethlehem 2000, adopted by the General Assembly by consensus and hence with the approval of the representatives of Israel in November 1998. That resolution express the hope, among other things, that the dawning of the new millennium of the Christian era may represent the beginning of a period of peace and prosperity and openness among all peoples and that, in this context, there may be rapid progress made in the peace process in the Middle East. In this way, the new millennium, pointed to by the resolution, may well be celebrated in an atmosphere of reconciliation which would permit freedom of movement and access to the faithful of all religions and all nations of the world.

The Bethlehem 2000 Project, which numbers the Italian Government among its main supporters, therefore imposes a symbolic meaning and significance which goes far beyond its real dimensions, encouraging and presupposing cooperation among the countries in the region. The Project represents a model of that spirit of concrete collaboration, which must animate peoples and Governments around the Mediterranean. In fact, it is unacceptable that on the threshold of the year 2000 the majority of the people around the Mediterranean still live in a situation of insecurity, poverty and lack of justice. My own generation lived through the period of the cold war. The peace that we had during that period of time was the direct outcome of the battles of terror between the two blocs — a peace in a negative sense, in the sense of peace because there was no warfare — and not constructive cooperation among peoples for common ends. The cold war in the northern hemisphere of the world made it practically impossible to solve regional or local conflicts because there was always the risk of another world war breaking out, one of these regional conflicts being the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The generation of the new millennium will live in the era of globalization of markets and open frontiers; enormous energies both material and human heretofore compressed will finally be liberated both for good and for evil. No longer protected by the umbrella of the two superpowers, the peoples of Europe and the Mediterranean will have to learn how to manage and to govern their own security, their own development and their own future and do it on their own. There will be an increase in spaces of liberty but it will be necessary to have a greater sense of responsibility and solidarity in order to create a situation whereby the spaces rediscovered would not turn into areas of greater disorder and insecurity. In a dangerous climate of social Darwinism what would prevail would be only the sense or the rationale of economy and markets. The peoples of the Mediterranean in the present situation are at risk of being shunted aside from the political, economic and cultural mainstreams of the global village. But if it is true that they need the world for their development and stability, it is likewise true that the cosmopolitan world of 2000 without frontiers, without cultural and ideal benchmarks, needs them, needs their wisdom, their civilization, their historical memory, that of people who are accustomed to living together, to trade, to exchange and to dialogue with those who are other than them and those who are far away from them.

In order to become directly involved in the mainstream of the global village, the Mediterranean must first and foremost assure stability, democracy and security within its own area. The other side of this pro-universal, pro-global and pro-cosmopolitan thrust is the rediscovery of how beautiful local is, how beautiful identity is — particularism. In order, metaphorically and physically, to tackle and to sail the distant seas, man has to be able to count on an ideal port where deeply dug are his roots, his specificity, his identity and his point of reference. It is precisely in this context that all the more urgent and timely becomes the aspiration of the Palestinian people to finally see the problem of their territory resolved, as a State side by side and in peaceful coexistence with the other peoples and States in the Middle East. It is likewise in this context that utmost importance is attached to the initiatives of Bethlehem 2000 so that the celebrations, as we approach the end of the second millennium in the Christian age, may involve an occasion for dialogue and also economic cooperation among all the populations of the region, with the assistance, public as well as private, of the international community and of civil society as a whole.

The invitation extended to the two Chambers of the Italian Parliament therefore assumes another meaning, not only an act of courtesy towards the Italian authorities but also an act of recognition for the increasing importance of parliaments and of parliamentary diplomacy in direct support of the foreign policy of Governments for cooperation towards the development of all peoples. In fact, it is precisely the Italian Parliament which was the promoter and sponsor of dialogue among parliaments in this region, supporting the parallel endeavours under way between the Governments of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which was launched in Barcelona in 1995. This dialogue endeavour, whose latest stage took place in Palermo last May, shall continue in the days to come at Palma de Mallorca and will, as we see it, constitute the premise for the decisive meeting of the European Council in Stuttgart next April. Palermo, therefore, marked a crucial turning point in international relations within the Mediterranean and did so both in terms of method because of the parallelism and synergy between parliamentary diplomacy and government diplomacy. This is in direct line with the present evolution which sees emerging more and more the human person in the folds of international law, modifying more and more the mechanisms and meanings of international law. It is also a turning point in strategy in the sense that it no longer is subordinate to efforts in economic, cultural and social affairs to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But it is decisive that the two processes must be complementary and must be contemporary. In other words, there cannot be peace and stability without democracy and economic development. But at the same time, there can be no economic development or democracy without peace and stability — the two tracks.

Now it must be quite obvious that the choice of Rome as the site for this Conference also represents a clear reference to the intention to set the celebrations of Bethlehem 2000 within the Jubilee of the end of the century, the Jubilee as a core wherein all persons of all races, continents, will come together in mutual respect for their own differences and converge towards a single destiny. This Jubilee is quite emblematic of the new spirit of our times. It is precisely in this spirit that, within the Italian Parliament, we have the initiative of parliamentarians for the Jubilee which includes among its activities some very interesting pilgrimages in the Mediterranean Sea along the pathways travelled by the Apostles from Palestine all the way to Rome. Through the representatives in the parliament, even those who may not be physically present in Rome, you will be able to participate in that atmosphere of reconciliation and peace which in its historical, cultural and religious meanings, joins the Jubilee of Rome to the Bethlehem 2000 Project.

MR. HUMAYUN RASHEED CHOUDHURY
Speaker of the Bangladeshi Parliament

I am doubly beholden to the organizers of this Conference, and to the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People first, for highlighting in this manner a cause dear to all of our hearts, and secondly, for according me the warm invitation to participate. This will not only bring to the fore the elements of the Bethlehem 2000 Project launched by the Palestinian Authority, but also, importantly, help raise public awareness about the issue of the rights of the Palestinian people, which so many of us have been advocating, so ceaselessly and so passionately, over such a long period of time.

It is only fitting that this meeting should take place in the Eternal City, with its million lights of hope. Classical Rome had given laws unto nations that created order in a turbulent world; modern Rome can, through this event, take us forward towards the fulfilment of the dreams and aspirations of the Palestinian people which will find fruition in the realization of their "New Jerusalem", one in which hope and peace will reign as we enter the new millennium. The bond between Rome and Bethlehem seems to have been forged in nature. Italy, her Government and her people, obviously understand this, and for this reason we are in their debt.

For 2,000 years Bethlehem has been seen as more than a city, or just a place where people live and work. It is viewed as an idea, as the embodiment of a message of love and reconciliation. The birthplace of Jesus Christ has evoked our adoration for centuries, and this association between the town and 'Mary's Boy Child' has indelibly stamped its name in the hearts and minds of billions around the world. Yet today, sadly, it is a mere shadow of its past glory. It has been buffeted relentlessly by cruel fate, and left with marks of decades of fierce struggle. These injuries, however, have not eroded its splendour. The ruins have not reduced its magnificence. Had not Christ taught us that sufferings elevate the soul? What is applicable to man is also applicable to his town.

As the Palestinian People come nearer to their cherished goal, the town is deserving of greater attention. The Bethlehem 2000 Project is an appropriate response. I am advised that it includes commemorative events of an international character, the restoration and modernization of infrastructures, the improvement of basic services and the preservation of the rich Palestinian heritage and history. The more we are able to mobilize support and assistance towards its fulfilment, the more we shall be able to contribute towards the symbolism of the union of divergent ethos for the attainment of a noble common goal. What better way is there than this to begin a new millennium, reflecting the brotherhood, and the resurgence, of the spirit of man?

The United Nations General Assembly deserves to be congratulated for adopting by consensus resolution 53/27 of 18 November 1998 on "Bethlehem 2000". By doing so, it has once again lived up to the resolve of its founding fathers that this creation of "we, the peoples of the United Nations" will be the beacon of hope for all peoples for all times. It was my privilege and honour to preside over the General Assembly in 1986. It fills me with pride, therefore, when I see that the august body takes lead roles in the march and the unfolding of history.

In many ways the General Assembly is a parliament of nations. I appreciate this more today as I chair our own National Parliament. I am heartened therefore by the paragraph in the Declaration adopted by the Special Session of the Inter-Parliamentary Council in New York, held in August-September 1995, and I quote: "Strengthening the relationship with national parliaments cannot but be beneficial to the United Nations. In whichever field it works, successful action of the United Nations requires that it has the support of the peoples around the world. Parliaments made up of men and women who are elected by the citizens at large and are in direct contact with the population and associations of their constituencies are also the most natural and legitimate institutions to represent the common interests of the various components of civil society. Action by parliaments and their members is crucial not only in implementing nationally the decisions which States have taken at an international level, it is also needed in relaying and explaining to the public the issues involved and therefore also in forging popular support for international action." Bethlehem 2000 can be an example of such cooperation in furtherance of a common aim.

Parliaments represent the voice of the people, and therefore, the voice of reason. When such voice is raised, nations and the world must hear it and listen. It is my belief that it will immeasurably help the cause of the Project if the parliament of each country that endorsed the United Nations resolution adopts a resolution of its own underscoring its support to it. This will raise the profile of the project, invest it with vast prestige, and in fact ensure its success. There could also be the "twinning" of municipal bodies between that of Bethlehem and those of other towns in all continents. This will create a web of positive interactions across the globe, and buttress support for the Project's success.

Today more than ever before the people of Bethlehem, and the people of Palestine, need to be spoken up for. At the end of their tunnel of misery, a light is indeed appearing. The Wye River Agreement has rekindled it. A home for the people of Palestine in a land which was, is and always will be theirs, is within the realm of distinct possibility. Their wringing prayers appear about to be answered.

The beauty of peace is that it is not a zero-sum game. None lose by it, and each protagonist tends to gain. We look to the day when the peoples of Israel and Palestine will coexist with one another in tranquillity and happiness; when the star that once shone over Bethlehem will rise again and light the paths of the people of that holy land in their march to a harmonious destiny, applauded all along the way by parliaments, peoples and nations of the world, and with the eternal blessings of the Almighty.

H.E. MR. NEHAD IBRAHIM ABDEL LATIF
Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to Italy,
on behalf of Dr. Ahmed Fathi Souror, Speaker of the People's
Assembly and President of the Arab Parliamentary Council

First of all, I would like to extend my thanks and great appreciation to Ambassador Ka, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in his initiative for the organization of the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference and for international support for this project, which is of clear interest. Bethlehem 2000 is not only a project which is of interest to all nations. It is in fact a message of peace in accordance with the aspirations of the Palestinian people and the aspirations of the Arab peoples for the establishment of peace and justice in the Middle East. In this connection, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Italian Government for the financial and moral assistance that they have given to this Project, which is fully in accordance with the role played by the Italian Government in the context of support for Palestine, on behalf of Mr. Ahmed Fathi Souror, President of our People's Assembly, who would have liked to have made this statement himself, but for reasons outside his control was unable to attend. And so he wished this message to be made before this Conference and, therefore, asked me to do so on his behalf.

"First of all, I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude for the generous invitation extended to us by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People to address this important Conference on the role of parliamentarians in the implementation of the Bethlehem 2000 Project, which was placed on the agenda as a result of exchanges in views between the Committee and national parliaments. I think this is a positive interaction between the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. National parliaments represent an excellent point of departure and a sort of milestone on the way that we should all follow as guidance for the success of this important Project, not only to safeguard peace in the Middle East but also to strengthen mutual understanding between all the peoples of the world. I would also like to extend my thanks and appreciation for the support given by the Italian Government to this Conference which is fully in accordance with the role played by Italy and the Italian Government in the international arena and in European affairs and how it is relating to the Mediterranean region.

"The importance of the initiative to hold this Conference lies in the high level of participation in this Conference and the importance that the international community attaches to the Bethlehem 2000 Project. It is an expression of the aspirations of the peoples of the Middle East who for years have undergone sufferings. The Conference is taking place at a very significant time on the eve of the year 2000 which will provide everyone with an opportunity to exchange views and opinions with a view to finding the best approaches and ways and means of implementing the Project. I think we should agree, in the context of this Conference, on the important political ideas which the Project should contain in order to improve the Project and develop it further. I think the way this Conference is being held represents a useful approach. We are happy to note the high level of the participants in this Conference and these people should make an important contribution to the Project to reflect therein the appropriate noble ideas so that it can rally substantial international support. I note with satisfaction that there is general support to expand the level of participation and I note the support for the initiative taken by the United Nations, the Italian Government and the effective participation of national parliaments, intergovernmental organizations, personalities, religious and cultural institutions and organizations, as well as various organizations of civil society. This is a task which we should all embark on together for the implementation of the Project to attain the widest participation in the Bethlehem 2000 Project so that all peace-loving peoples are able to be

involved in the Project, so that there is clear and effective support for the achievement of its noble goals, so that we can have a strong and effective international pressure group for strengthening the peace process, a process which we so long for, without deviating from the path or deforming it in any way.

"The purpose of the Conference on Bethlehem 2000 is to achieve a just and lasting peace and establish the necessary mechanisms to achieve such a just and lasting peace. So I would like to reaffirm here that the Bethlehem 2000 Project should be focused on one major goal and that is to put the peace process back on track by the year 2000. A conference should be held in the City of Bethlehem with the largest possible participation that could agree on an international vision for the restoration of peace in the region which has suffered so much. It would be a framework for setting the task for the achievement of that international vision so that the region can assume once again its historic role as a meeting place of civilizations, religious toleration and religious and scientific progress.

"I would like to express the sense of frustration that we feel at the present time in Egypt, Palestine and other Arab countries when we opted for the strategy of peace and committed ourselves to that strategy and the requirements thereof. We find serious obstacles to the peace process. Egypt clearly opted for the path of peace and the restoration of peace and other countries followed — with the Oslo Agreements in 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in 1995, and the considerable progress in the Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. But now, there has been a big reversal in the peace process with the policies of the current Israeli Government placing impossible obstacles to the peace process whereby Israel is prepared to make no concessions whatsoever. The Government is disregarding all the demands of the other party without offering anything on its own part as a counter-offer or concession. We call on Israel to withdraw from all the territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem. The peace process is a process of interaction and cannot only be based on unilateral decisions or approaches when we are talking about a substantial heritage and ongoing struggle for many years between the Israelis and the Palestinians. One has every right to ask why Palestinian children took up bunches of flowers when they were happy to see Israeli soldiers leaving their territory. People should wonder why those same children are throwing stones now despite the pressure directed against them to stop it. It is important to take the right course, the proper course, which is the path towards security that meets the needs of all parties because the other path of imposing policies on the other party with no concessions, making demands without offering anything in return, is doomed to failure, a path which offers no concessions whatsoever for the other party to be able to make progress.

"Absolute security is unobtainable. Peace can only be established once there has been a normalization of relations between the two parties and once one has clearly opted for peace. I would like to reaffirm solemnly before this assembly that in Egypt and the Arab countries we support the strategy of peace and assume all responsibilities derived from that choice. We do so because we are convinced of this noble principle of peace not only because of the present situation but because we are aware of the need to restore peace if there is to be a better future for the people. We believe that a programme should be initiated to put the peace process back on track on the basis of agreements, based on greater tolerance, leading to a peaceful settlement of the problem. We first hope that the next few years might see the end of a conflict that has gone on for only too long and in which rights have been violated in a way that the world is no longer prepared to stand for.

"The task of putting the peace process back on track is a task that we, as parliamentarians, should be prepared to assume first and foremost and more than other people because we are those who adopt resolutions and provide the guidance for the executive authorities to take important decisions. It is essential to bring all means possible to bear to achieve this noble goal and I would reaffirm here that the Council of the People's Assembly has spared no efforts to perform the task incumbent upon it in this respect and has taken active part in all activities at home and abroad. This is a role that has been played by all Arab parliamentarians and the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, which I have the honour to preside over. We are making every effort to foster the peace process because we feel that it is absolutely essential. We cannot leave things as they are or the peace process is going to wither on the bough. We are now approaching the third millennium and this is a time to give thought to the noble ideals of the revealed religion based on settlement of disputes on love and justice.

"For us the choice is clear between peace and conflict, between hatred and coexistence. We should all opt for peace, for the truth. We hope that all will opt for this approach and that security will finally prevail in our region."

VI. CLOSING SESSION

H.E. MR. RINO SERRI
Senator
Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy and
Representative of the Host Government

We have now come to the end of our two-day meeting, during which we have had a very intense and highly constructive dialogue devoted to the presentation of the Bethlehem 2000 Project. Please allow me first of all to express my most heartfelt congratulations and thanks to all the organizers of this event, and in particular, my thanks to all the members of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and to the Chairman of the Committee. I would like to underscore that the City of Rome, the Government and the Italian people have been terribly honoured to have had the opportunity to host this Conference. I am fully convinced of the fact that these two days of very high-level dialogue have reconfirmed a very widespread and strong support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project, support for its motives, its very reasons for being, its objectives, and this support comes from the international community. We therefore thank the work of Governments, intergovernmental organizations, parliaments, cultural and religious institutions, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. As we know, they will now be able to work with greater awareness and along the path to convergence in order to enrich and achieve the different initiatives that are being launched under this Project.

The fact that Bethlehem 2000 is closely related to the forthcoming millennium celebrations in the Jubilee year requires that Italy be involved to a very great extent, along with its capital city, in these endeavours. I would like to reassure you as to the fact that the Italian Government is fully aware of this commitment and will make all the necessary efforts in this regard. I wish to highlight the commitment that we need in order to facilitate the movement of a great number of people and thereby provide them with access to all the holy places, access which should also be provided to the followers of all religions and all nationalities, with a view to restoring and enhancing the cultural heritage and developing and consolidating relations among peoples, institutions and communities.

It is for this reason that we think Italy needed to fulfil an obligation whereby it took part in a co-funding effort, together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for Bethlehem 2000. We intend to support other projects in the area as well. We sincerely hope to see an increase in the number of initiatives of this kind — a multiplication, as it were, so as to build for the opening of the new millennium a great event based on dialogue, understanding, peace for all the peoples of this area, the wider Mediterranean region and, of course, other areas as well.

This is particularly true for the Palestinian people. The Palestinian people need to be able to fully resume the peace process within safer shores, as it were; as our Foreign Minister Dini has said, they need to be able to work within the guiding principles established at Oslo, in favour of the exercise of their rights to a homeland, self-determination and economic, social and civil development. We know how many difficulties there are and they are by no means easy to overcome. Yet the very nature of the event that we have been discussing, the very name that it bears — Bethlehem 2000 — conveys, I think, in all of us a feeling of hope and of knowing trust as well as a renewed commitment.

I would once again like to thank you all on behalf of the Italian Government and I would like to say with my warmest feeling of friendship *Arrivederci*. To the year 2000 — see you again in the year 2000 — in Rome or in any other place in this world that is engaged in the furtherance of peace and solidarity.

H.E. MR. NABEEL KASSIS
Minister, Coordinator-General of the Bethlehem 2000
Project Authority, representative of Palestine

On behalf of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian National Authority, I would like to extend the thanks of the Palestinian people to the Chairman and members of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for organizing this Conference and I would also like to thank the Italian Government and people for hosting this important meeting in Rome, this Italian city that will be joining hands with Bethlehem during the holy year of the Jubilee. I shall not go through the list of all those who contributed to make this meeting a success, which I think it was. I thank them all and I would like to make special mention of all the honourable representatives of their countries and organizations who gave messages and made statements of support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project. To you all I say that your support means a lot to us and we find the suggestions that you made invaluable and the advice you gave us quite useful and enriching. We shall look carefully at all these suggestions and we shall be in contact with you. We intend to follow up on all suggestions and on all contacts made here.

This Conference has certainly contributed a great deal to putting the millennial celebrations of Bethlehem on the map. There are many celebrations taking place in the year 2000 and projecting the uniqueness of the Bethlehem 2000 celebration is very much in the spirit of the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly recently during its fifty-third session. The Palestinian National Authority is determined to make this Project a success, and although the measure of the success cannot be fathomed immediately after the start of the celebrations, the launch has to be strong enough to give confidence in the possibility of achieving the long-term objectives that we have set for the Project. I look forward to seeing you all with us when we launch this Project in Christmas 1999.

H.E. MR. IBRA DEGUÈNE KA
Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the
Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

We have come to Rome so that together we can support the Palestinian Authority, so that we can also support the Bethlehem 2000 Project. But more than that, we have come here to meet so that we can recall a very significant message, that of Bethlehem, Bethlehem's message of peace, of reconciliation; a message of tolerance and forgiveness and one that was sent to the world 2,000 years ago by Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The representatives of parliaments, intergovernmental organizations, various institutions and non-governmental organizations that participated in our discussions have all been guided by the wish to make a genuine contribution in this international effort to help the Palestinian Authority and all the Palestinian people in order to make Bethlehem 2000 a success.

Thus we have come to the end of our work following two days of intense activity and on behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. I really want to say how impressed we have been by the quality, the content and the candidness of our discussions. After the wealth of information that we have had, fuelled by the interesting statements made by participants and Government representatives, the members of the Committee believe that it would be appropriate to try and summarize the essence of the statements in a declaration that henceforth will be known as the Rome Declaration on Bethlehem 2000. We cannot leave Rome without having a Rome Declaration. The text of the Rome Declaration on Bethlehem 2000 will be published as a press release.

I wish to express the heartfelt congratulations of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People to all participants, to the representatives of the donor community, as well as the representatives of intergovernmental organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations for their high-quality participation in our work. On behalf of the Committee, we would once again like to thank H.E. Mr. Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, as well as the entire Italian Government and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Lamberto Dini, and his Ministry. I would also like to thank the Mayor of the City of Rome, the Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate. I would also like to thank my brother and friend, Mr. Paolo Fulci, the Permanent Representative of the Italian Republic to the United Nations, who has given us invaluable support in the preparation of this Conference. I also wish to thank everyone, all the distinguished persons who have supported this major Conference and who have made generous financial contributions for holding it. I would also like to thank the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as well as the staff of FAO who have been associated with the holding of this Conference and have also given their support for it. I would like to thank FAO for having contributed to the preparation and also to the organization of the Palestinian Cultural Exhibit which has been set up. I would like also to thank the Division for Palestinian Rights of the United Nations Secretariat, as well as the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations information centre in Rome for their tireless efforts and dedication. Their work is most appreciated.

Before closing this meeting, I would like to inform you that the report of the Conference will be published by the Secretariat at United Nations Headquarters in New York. I hope that those of you returning to your homes will have a good trip back. May God bless us all and I declare the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference closed.

VII. THE ROME DECLARATION ON BETHLEHEM 2000

In the year 2000, the past and the future will meet in Bethlehem in a global vision of hope and peace for all peoples. The world will celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the dawning of the third millennium. This event is of paramount importance not only for the Palestinian people and for the region, but also for the believers of the world and for the international community as a whole.

The Bethlehem 2000 International Conference was held in Rome, on 18 and 19 February 1999, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Participants in the Conference included eminent political and religious personalities, among others, H.E. Mr. Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal, the President of the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Mayor of Rome, representatives of Governments, including donor countries, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations system organizations and agencies, parliamentarians, the Bethlehem Municipality and non-governmental organizations.

During the Conference, the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the delegation of the Committee had the honour and privilege of being received by His Excellency Dr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, who expressed the readiness of his country to continue to make every effort aimed at bringing the peace process back on track.

The delegation of the Committee was also received by His Holiness Pope John Paul II, who encouraged the Committee's endeavours and sent his blessings for the success of the coming celebrations in Bethlehem in a true spirit of peace, tolerance and reconciliation among all the peoples on earth.

The Conference underscored the monumental importance attached worldwide to honouring the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. It recognized and celebrated the history and the future of the Palestinian City of Bethlehem — the birthplace of Jesus Christ as a place of peace.

The Conference was aimed also at supporting and promoting the Bethlehem 2000 Project launched by the Palestinian Authority and at ensuring the greatest possible international participation in its realization. The Conference also highlighted the urgency of bringing economic recovery and prosperity to the Palestinian people following decades of conflict and dispossession.

The inclusion by the United Nations General Assembly of an item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of its fifty-third and fifty-fourth sessions was viewed as a major step towards increasing the engagement and participation of the international community in the Bethlehem 2000 Project. The participants also welcomed the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 53/27 of 18 November 1998 without a vote and considered it as a clear reflection of the world community's strong desire to bring the era of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation to the people of Bethlehem and the entire Middle East.

The Conference participants noted the important work done by the Palestinian Authority on the various aspects of the Bethlehem 2000 Project. The participants reviewed the status and the needs of the Project, as well as the difficulties the Palestinian Authority faced in its implementation. They emphasized the urgency of making concrete improvements in the situation on the ground in the city and its vicinity. The participants also stressed the need for the development of Bethlehem's municipal infrastructure and public services, the preservation of its rich cultural heritage, tourist development and private sector. Freedom of movement and unhindered access to the Holy Places in Bethlehem by the faithful of all religions and nationalities are essential to the city's revival. The reconstruction of historic sites in this Holy Land should become a fitting tribute to the spiritual significance of Bethlehem — a symbol of enduring hope, harmony and peace.

The participants were encouraged by the assistance of the international donor community in reconstructing and rehabilitating the Palestinian economy and, in particular, the donor countries', agencies' and private sector's engagement in various projects in the City of Bethlehem. In that regard, the participants welcomed the Bethlehem 2000 Participants Conference held in Brussels in May 1998. The Conference also thanked the Governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector who have participated in the Conference. Their participation demonstrated the broad international support for the Bethlehem 2000 initiative.

The participants also recognized the important role played by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Bank and other United Nations system organizations and agencies in ensuring the success of this major undertaking.

The participation in the Conference of His Excellency Mr. Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, was welcomed by the participants. They expressed their appreciation for his untiring efforts and leadership in the quest for a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine and a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

The participants expressed deep appreciation and gratitude to the Government of Italy for hosting the Conference and for the generous financial contribution towards the promotion of this important event.

The participants would like to thank in particular His Excellency Dr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, the Government of Italy, The Honourable Francesco Rutelli, Mayor of Rome, and Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, for their support of the Conference.

VIII. STATEMENT MADE BY HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II BEFORE THE DELEGATION OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE EXERCISE OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE DURING THE PAPAL AUDIENCE AT THE VATICAN ON 19 FEBRUARY 1999

I warmly welcome you this morning, members of the Organizing Committee of the International Forum "Bethlehem 2000". I greet especially Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations and Chairman of the Committee, and Sir Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

The City of Bethlehem stirs memories reaching far back in the history of ancient Israel to the figure of King David (cf.1 Sam 16:13). Yet it is the birth of Jesus Christ, the son of David, which gives Bethlehem its unique place in the mind and heart of the world. The Gospel of Saint Luke reports that at the birth of Jesus angels sang of peace on earth to all people of good will (cf.Lk 2:14). And although Bethlehem's history since then has often been marked by violence, the city still stands as a promise of peace and an assurance that the human hope for peace is not vain.

The Great Jubilee, which will celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, invites us to look forward in hope to a world in which peace will be secure. We must all work for a future in which there will be no threat to peace from among the worshippers of the one God, from any who bear the name of Christian or Jew or Muslim. In particular, we must be confident that it is possible to build peace in the Middle East. The promise of peace made at Bethlehem will become a reality when the dignity and the rights of human beings made in the image of God (cf.Gen 1:26) are acknowledged and respected.

May the work of your Committee help to ensure that the birthplace of the One "who shepherds God's people" (cf. Mt 2:6) will remind people everywhere that peace is God's gift from above. May the Lord's blessings assist you in this noble endeavour!

IX. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Governments

Afghanistan	Mr. Hamidullah Nasser-Zia, Minister and Chargé d'affaires Mme Adela Hachemi Farhâdi, Adviser, Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations
Angola	H.E. Mr. Antero Abreu, Ambassador Mr. Sergio Neto, First Secretary Mr. Batista Miguel, Second Secretary
Austria	Mr. Andreas Schmidinger, Counsellor
Bangladesh	H.E. Mr. Humayun Rasheed Choudhumy, Speaker of Parliament H.E. Mr. Muhammad Zamir, Ambassador to Italy and Permanent Representative to FAO Mr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Political Counsellor

	Mr. Mohammad Mejbahuddin, Economic Counsellor Mr. M.A. Muhith, Second Secretary Mr. Harunur Rashid, Law Officer, Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat Mr. Sirajul Islam Badsha
Belarus	H.E. Ms. Natalia Drozd, Ambassador to Italy H.E. Mr. Ogurtzov, Ambassador at Large
Belgium	Mr. Sa'i Paul Brancart, Counsellor, Economic Affairs
Brazil	Mr. João Mauricio Cabral de Mello, Second Secretary
Bulgaria	Mr. Kodjabachev Kostadin, Counsellor
Burkina Faso	H.E. Ms. Béatrice Damiba, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Tiemtore Juste, Minister Counsellor
Canada	Mr. Ronald Rose, Deputy Permanent Representative to FAO Mr. Gilbert Laurent, Counsellor
Cape Verde	H.E. Mr. Eduardo Jorge Lima Barros Silva, Permanent Representative to FAO
Chile	H.E. Mr. Alvaro Briones Ramirez, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Carlos Parker, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Rodrigo Olsen
China	Mr. Zhang Limin, Counsellor, Mr. Tang Heng, Second Secretary
Colombia	Mr. Juan Carlos Espinosa, First Secretary Mr. Bernardo Gutiérrez Zuluega, Alternate Representative to FAO
Congo	Mr. Rufin Gabriel Ambero, Chargé d'Affaires Mr. G. Guito, First Counsellor Mr. F. Makaya, First Secretary
Costa Rica	H.E. Mrs. V. Guardia de Hernández, Ambassador to Italy Mrs. Marcela Suñol, Counsellor Mrs. Jolanda Gogo, Minister Counsellor
Côte d'Ivoire	H.E. Mr. Kouassi Emmanuel Alexandre Nouama, Ambassador to Italy and Permanent Representative to FAO Mr. Kouame Marius Assemian, Counsellor
Croatia	H.E. Dr. Davokin Rudolf, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Blanimir Cecuk, First Secretary
Cuba	H.E. Mr. Mario Rodríguez Martínez, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Alfonso González Peña, Counselor
Cyprus	H.E. Mrs. Myrna Y. Kleopas, Ambassador to Italy

Czech Republic	Mr. Alexander Slaby, Director, United Nations Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Jiri Novak, Counsellor
Denmark	H.E. Mr. Henrik Rée Iversen, Ambassador to Italy
Ecuador	Dr. Carlos Larrea Davila, Second Secretary
Egypt	H.E. Mr. Nehad Ibrahim Abdel Latif, Ambassador to Italy Mrs. Nahed El Ashry, Minister Plenipotentiary Mr. Yasser Reda Said, Counsellor Mr. Anba Moussa Mr. M. Elshakaa
Ethiopia	H.E. Ms. Mohammed Halima, Ambassador
Finland	H. E. Mr. Dieter Wolfgang Vitzhum, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Tarja Fernandez, Second Secretary
France	H.E. Mr. Jacques Blot, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Christian Saves, Chancellerie
Georgia	Mr. Kostantin Zhgenti, Minister Plenipotentiary
Germany	H.E. Mr. F. von Nordenskjöld, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Rolf Schütte, First Counsellor Mr. Arne Wolf, Counsellor
Ghana	Mr. E.K.A. Deh, Counsellor
Greece	Mr. G. Marcantonatos, Consul-General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr. D.A. Kyvetos, Counsellor, Deputy Permanent Representative of Greece to FAO Mr. Nicolas Pazios, First Counsellor, Embassy to the Holy See
Guatemala	H.E. Mrs. Josefina Morales F., Ambassador to Italy
Guyana	H.E. Mr. Lalleshwar Singh, Ambassador, High Commissioner to London
Haiti	Mr. J. Walnard-Dorneval, Minister Counsellor, Chargé d'affaires, Permanent Representative a.i.
Honduras	H.E. Mr. Oscar Kafati, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Noly Geadah de Kafati
Hungary	H.E. Mr. Attila Gecse, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Tanás Korsós, Chargé d'affaires Mr. Peter Szöke, Second Secretary
India	H.E. Mr. K.P. Fabian, Ambassador to Italy Mr. S. M. Mathur, Counsellor

Indonesia	H.E. Mr. Irawan Abidin, Ambassador to the Holy See Dr. R. M. Marty M. Natalegawa, Counsellor, Permanent Mission to the United Nations
Ireland	H.E. Mr. Joseph Small, Ambassador to Italy Mr. James Gawley, First Secretary
Italy	H.E. Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs H. Mr. Rino Serri, Deputy Foreign Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Antonio Badini, Minister Plenipotentiary Mr. Paolo Francese, Minister, Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations Mr. Francesco Plausi, Minister Plenipotentiary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Giacomo Sanfelice, Counsellor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Giovanni Pugliese, Counsellor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ms. Daniela Roibiolio Bose, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Jamaica	Dr. Salvatore Alfano, Honourary Consul-General to Italy
Japan	Mr. Ichiro Ogasawara, First Secretary
Jordan	H.E. Mr. Samir Massarweh, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Suheil Fares, Minister Counsellor Mr. Slaiman Al Arabiat, Counsellor
Kenya	Ms. Abigail N. Shani, Commercial Attaché
Kuwait	Mr. Tareq Khalid Ahmad Al Hamad, Second Secretary
Luxembourg	Mr. Raymond Dutreux, Counsellor
Madagascar	Mr. François Rakamisy, First Counsellor Mr. Bruno Joseph, Counsellor
Malta	Mr. Rachel Sapiano, First Secretary Ms. Vanessa Grima Baldacchino
Mauritania	M. Ikebrou Ould Mohamed, Director a.i., Dept. Arab World, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Mr. Houssein Ould Sidi Abdallah
Mexico	H.E. Mr. Jorge Chen Charpentier, Ambassador to Hungary Ms. Danielle Albertos de Cáceres, Political Affairs Attaché Ms. María de los Angeles Arriola, Alternate Representative
Morocco	H.E. Mr. Zine El Abidine Sebti, Ambassador to Italy and Permanent Representative to FAO Mr. Ahmed Afailal, Minister Counsellor Mr. Rachid El Jouahari, Counsellor Mr. Fakhr Eddine Es-Saaidi, Counsellor
Myanmar	Ms. Winn Myint, Counsellor/Alternate Permanent Representative to Italy

Namibia	Hon. Dr. Nickey Iyambo, Minister of Regional, Local Government and Housing
Netherlands	Ms. Astrid de Vries, Second Secretary
New Zealand	H.E. Mr. Peter Bennett, Ambassador to Italy
Niger	Mme Illo Aichatou Gisele, Director of International Conferences and Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and African Integration M. Amadou Sounna, Chief, Middle East Section, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and African Integration M. Zakariaou Adam Maiga, Counsellor Mrs. Olibandawaki Saoude, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock
Nigeria	Mr. K.T. Badejo, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations
Norway	Mr. Irvin Eyolf Høyland, Minister Counsellor Mr. Ole Chr. Kuarme, Bishop of the Church of Norway
Oman	H.E. Mr. Said K. Al-Busaidi, Ambassador
Pakistan	H.E. Mr. Arif Ayub, Ambassador Mr. Athar Mehmood, Minister
Paraguay	H.E. Mr. Oscar Jesus Cabello-Sarubbi, Ambassador Mr. Raul Reinaldo Inchausti Valdez, Counsellor
Philippines	Mr. Marciano A. Paynor, Minister Counsellor, Chargé d'affaires Ms. Glea P. Saunar, Attaché
Poland	Mr. Zbigniew Szymanski, Director, United Nations Department (Political Affairs), Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Lech Kubiak, Counsellor
Portugal	H.E. Mr. João Diogo Nunes Barata, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Dr. Claudia Boesch, First Secretary, Alternate Permanent Representative
Qatar	H.E Mr. Ahmed Ali Al-Ansari, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Fahad Ibrahim Al-Mana, First Secretary Mr. Akeel Hatoor
Republic of Korea	H.E. Mr. Chung Tae-ik, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Kwon Sae-young, First Secretary
Romania	H.E. Mr. Teodor Baconsky, Ambassador to the Holy See Mr. Viorel Tomescu, First Secretary
Russian Federation	Mr. Valerian V. Shouvaev, Chief of Section, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
San Marino	H.E. Ms. Barbara Para, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Maria Lea Pedini, Minister Plenipotentiary, Director of Cultural Affairs and Information, Department of Foreign Affairs

Saudi Arabia	Mr. Abdallah Redouane, Secretary-General of the Islamic Cultural Centre, Rome Mr. Abdulrahman Al Hadlag, First Secretary Mr. Mazin E. Al-Malik
Senegal	H.E. Mr. Jacques Baudin, Minister for Foreign Affairs and of Senegalese Living Abroad, Head of Delegation H.E. Mr. Mame Balla Sy, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Abdou Salam Diallo, Chief of the United Nations Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of Senegalese Living Abroad H.E. Mr. Henri A. Turpin, Ambassador to the Holy See Mr. Moussa Bocar Ly, Minister-Counsellor Mr. Diouf Abdoukarios, Counsellor
Slovakia	Mr. Andrej Thbacik, Counsellor
South Africa	Mr. R.J.J. Van Vuren, Counsellor Mrs. S. Jacobs, First Secretary
Spain	H.E. Mr. D. Juan Prat y Coll, Ambassador to Italy Mr. D. Félix Costales, Counsellor
Sri Lanka	Mr. D. Kalatilleke, Counsellor (Commercial)
Sudan	H.E. Mr. Mahadi Mustafa El Hadi, Ambassador to Italy H.E. Mr. Altireifi Kormino, Ambassador, Deputy Head of Mission Mr. Tag Eldin Elhadi Eltahir, First Secretary
Sweden	H.E. Mr. Goran Berg, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Karin Stälberg, First Secretary
Syrian Arab Republic	Dr. Najdi Al-Jazzar, Chargé d'affaires Mr. Yahia Diab
Thailand	H.E. Mr. Somboon Sangiambut, Ambassador to Italy Ms. Atchara Suyanan, Minister Mr. Suhar Sungchaya, First Secretary
Togo	H.E. Mr. C. Agba Kondi, Ambassador to France, Permanent Representative to FAO Mr. Nayo Kokou Ivah, Attaché
Tunisia	H.E. Mr. Azouz Ennifar, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Naceur Bouail, Counsellor Mr. Habib Kaabachi, Director, Department for United Nations and International Conferences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Turkey	H.E. Mr. Altan Güven, Ambassador to the Holy See Mr. Yücel Güçlü, Minister-Counsellor Mr. Ugur Akmichal
Uganda	H.E. Mr. Vincent Kirabokyamaria, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Joshua Mutabazi, First Secretary Mr. Martin Kasirye, Second Secretary

Ukraine	H.E. Mr. Volodymyr Yevtukh, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Volodymyr Yatsenkivskiy, Counsellor Mr. Valeriy Mykhaylov, First Secretary Mr. Ruslan Semenchenko, Second Secretary
United Arab Emirates	H.E. Mr. Mohammed Fahed Al Dunaim, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Mohamed Fahad Al Duhailif
United Republic of Tanzania	Ms. Grace Maro Mujuma, First Counsellor
United States of America	Ms. Laurie Tracy, Acting Permanent Representative to FAO
Uruguay	Ms. Rossana Rubiños, Embassy to the Holy See
Viet Nam	H.E. Mr. Tran Minh Quoc, Ambassador to Italy
Yemen	H.E. Mr. Mohamed Abdullah Elwazir, Ambassador Mr. Mosleh Ali Saad Hajar, Minister Mr. Ali Abdullah S. Al-A'Amdi, Minister Ms. Maria Alessandra Aprile
Zambia	H.E. Mr. Newstead L. Zimba, Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services H.E. Dr. Peter Chintala, Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs H.E. Mr. Isaiah Zimba Chabala, Ambassador to Italy Mr. Muyambo Sipangule, Acting Director, International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Zimbabwe	Ms. Grace Manyarara, Counsellor, Embassy of Zimbabwe

Non-member States maintaining permanent observer missions at Headquarters

Holy See	His Eminence Roger Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Head of delegation Rev. Msgr. Giovanni d'Aniello, Counsellor of Nunciature with the Session for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State Mr. Laza Mihai Achim
Switzerland	H.E. M. Dante Martinelli, Ambassador to Italy Mrs. Ingrid Apelbaum, Minister

Other organizations having received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly and maintaining permanent observer missions at Headquarters

Palestine	H.E. Mr. Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority Mr. Nimer Hammad, General Delegate of Palestine to Italy Mr. Hani Gaber, General Delegation of Palestine to Italy

Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations

Sir Kieran Prendergast
Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs

Delegation of the Committee on the Exercise
of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

H.E. Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka
Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations
Chairman of the Committee

H. E. Mr. Bruno E. Rodríguez Parrilla
Permanent Representative of Cuba to the United Nations
Vice-Chairman of the Committee

H.E. Dr. Ravan A. G. Farhâdi
Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations
Vice-Chairman of the Committee

H.E. Mr. George Saliba
Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations
Rapporteur of the Committee

H.E. Mme Mahawa Bangoura Camara
Permanent Representative of Guinea to the United Nations

H.E. Dr. M. Nasser Al-Kidwa
Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations

Speakers

H.E. Mr. Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
President of the Islamic Cultural Centre, Rome

Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek
Director of Sabeel, Jerusalem

Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell
General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Dr. Humayun Rasheed Choudhury
Speaker of the Bangladeshi Parliament

Mr. Dwain C. Epps
Director, Programme Unit III – Justice, Peace and Creation
World Council of Churches

Mr. Domenico Fisichella, Senator
Vice-President of the Italian Senate and Representative of the President of the Italian Senate

Mr. Miguel Angel Martinez
President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

His Eminence Cardinal Anba Moussa
General Archpriest, Representative of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

H.E. Dr. Nabeel Kassis
Coordinator-General of the Bethlehem 2000 Project Authority

Mr. Hanna Nasser
Mayor of Bethlehem

His Eminence The Metropolitan of Switzerland, Damaskinos Papandreou
Representative of His All Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople,
New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarchate

Rev. Father Archpriest Victor Petlyuchenko
Vice-Chairman, Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations

The Hon. Francesco Rutelli
Mayor of Rome

His Beatitude Msgr. Michel Sabbah
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

Mr. Nabil Sarraf
Vice-President, Palestine Development and Investment Company

Mr. Valdo Spini
President of the Parliamentary Association of Friendship Italy-Israel

Hon. Luciano Violante
President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

United Nations organs, agencies and bodies

International Fund for Agricultural Development	Mr. Bahman Mansuri, Programme Director and Deputy to the Assistant President, Economic Policy and Resource Strategy Department
International Labour Organization	Mr. Giovanni di Cola, ILO Senior Programming Officer, Bureau for the Promotion of Active Partnership and Technical Cooperation
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	Ms. Ana Liria-Franch, Representative UNHCR Rome
United Nations Development Programme	Mr. Olivier Adam, Deputy Director, Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People, UNDP

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	Mr. Omar Massalha, Director, Action Coordination Unit in support of the Palestinian People
World Food Programme	Mr. Tun Myat, Director, Resources and External Relations Division Mr. Pierre Bourgeois, Deputy Regional Director Mr. Paul Turnbull, Liaison Officer, Middle East and North Africa Bureau

Intergovernmental organizations

International Organization for Migration	Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy, Chief of Mission Ms. Meri Virta
League of Arab States	H.E. Mr. Said Kamal, Assistant Secretary-General for Palestine Affairs H.E. Mr. Mohamad Ali Mohamad, Head of Mission in Rome Mr. Ghaleb Saleh, Department of Palestine Affairs in the Arab League Secretariat General Mr. Khaldoun Roueiha, Counsellor of the Mission in Rome
Organization of the Islamic Conference	H.E. Dr. Azeddine Laraki, Secretary-General Mr. Abdelaziz Aboughosh, Assistant Secretary-General for Jerusalem and Palestine

Special guests

Mr. Alberto Mangano, Alderman of the Mayor, City of Palermo

Non-governmental organizations

Agency for Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean, Rome	Mr. Franco La Torre
AISPO - Associazione Italiana per la Solidarieta'tra I Popoli, Milan	Dr. Pietro Conti
Alliance Coopérative Internationale	Mr. Lino Visani
Anglican Communion Jacksonville, FL (USA)	Rev. Dr. Paul Hamilton Fuller
Arab Women's Council Potomac, MD (USA)	Ms. Najat Arafat Khelil
Arab Women's Union Bethlehem via Israel	Ms. Julia Michel Dabdoub Ms. Pauline Anastas

Arci Cultura e Sviluppo Rome	Ms. R. Bolini Mr. G. Rassimelli
Association Belgo-Palestine Brussels	Mr. Pierre Galand Mr. Parkh Nadia
Association France-Palestine Paris	Ms. Isabelle Avran
Association Medicale Italo-Palestinese Rome	Mr. Sansia Gaetani Mr. Manglio Giacanelli Mr. Mohamed Musa
Association Medicale Franco-Palestinienne Paris	Mr. Jean-Marie Gaubert
Association per la Pace Rome	Ms. Luisa Morgantini
Associazione Nazionale Amicizia e Cooperazione Italo-Araba, Roma	Mr. Emo Egoli
Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation Bethlehem	Mr. Edmund Shehadeh
Catholic Commission against Hunger and for Development (CCFD), Paris	Mr. T.A. Ferrant Hocine
Centro Studi Città Roma	Mr. Costantino Protano Mr. Mario Belli
Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP), Rome	Mr. Gianluca Falcitelli
Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), Cairo	Ms. Hanan Ghanoun Ms. Venece Kades
Council for the Advancement of Arab- British Understanding, London	Mr. Chris Doyle
Council on Development of the Evangelical Church of Egypt, Cairo	Rev. Helmy Kades Ms. Venice Kades
Ethical Law and Social Aspects FHIA Programme, EU	Collet Serge
European Consultancy and Legal Network Brussels	Mr. Giulio Murano (Rome Branch)
Festival Transméditerranée Marseille, France	Ms. Madani Latifa

Flemish Committee for Solidarity with Palestine, Brussels	Mr. Tish Declercq
French Platform for NGOs Paris	Ms. Emmanuelle Caillouet Ms. Isabelle Avran
Gaza Community Mental Health Programme Gaza City, Gaza	Mr. Husam El-Nounou
General Arab Women Organisation Baghdad	Dr. Juliette Sayegh
General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, New York	Mr. Liberato C. Bautista
General Union of Palestinian Women Ramallah	Ms. Siham Sukkar
Greek Committee for International Democratic Solidarity, Athens	Ms. Maria Gazi Mr. Theocharis Papamargaris
GVC (Civil Volunteer Group) Bologna, Italy	Ms. Dina Taddia Mr. Luigi Jechezzo
Indo-Arab Islamic Association New Delhi	Mr. K.M. Khan Ms. Anwar Khatoon Mr. Mohd N. Khan Mr. Rajwinder Singh Mr. Darshan Singh
Indo-Palestine Solidarity Organization Calcutta, India	Mr. Sri A. Sujanapal
International Association for Water Law	Mr. Dante Cofonecre
International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Brussels	Mr. Bruno Rossi (Rome representative)
International Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine	Dr. Don Betz
International Development Law Rome	Ms. Karin Forneris Ms. Sunar Dubois Ms. Andrea de Mais
International Falcon Movement - Socialist Educational International, Laurent, France	Ms. Odetta Lambert
International Relief Friendship Foundation New York	Mr. Franco Pasqualini

Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Organization of the Islamic Conference Karachi, Pakistan	Ms. Attiya Nawazish Ali
Italian Centre for Peace Milan, Italy	Mr. Janiki Cingoli Ms. Piera Redaelli
Kinnaird College for Women Lahore, Pakistan	Mr. Mira Phailbus Mr. Duré-Sameen Hameed Chaudhary
KKK General Trade Manufacturing Rome	Mr. Riccardo Argentieri
Labour Union Palermo, Italy	Mr. Grazioli Piero
Local Authorities for Peace-Italian Coordination, Perugia, Italy	Mr. Flavio Lotti
Middle East Fellowship of Southern California, Burbank, CA (USA)	Rev. Darrell D. Meyers
Middle East Peace Foundation Columbus, OH (USA)	Ms. Regina Siren Mr. Thomas Mustric
Movimiento por la Paz Brussels	Ms. Irune Dovinnezabal
Movimondo Molisv Rome	Mr. Giuseppe Crippa Mr. Dino Cipriani Ms. Paola Pinelli Ms. Claudia Cortellucci
National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, New York	Dr. Joan B. Campbell Mr. David M. Weaver
Norwegian Association of NGOs for Palestine Oslo	Mr. Erik M. Dugstad
Palestine Red Crescent Society El-Bireh, Ramallah	Dr. Fathi Arafat Mr. Salman Yousef
Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees Shu'fat, Jerusalem	Ms. Rula Nesnas Mr. Ahmed J. Sourani (Gaza Branch)
Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace Ramallah	Dr. Meri'e A. Al Rahman Dr. Allam Jarrar Dr. Sameer Shehadeh
Palestinian PEN Centre World Association of Writers, Jerusalem	Ms. Hanan Awwad Ms. Nariman Al-Far

Pax Christi International Brussels	Mr. Luigi Bettazzi Mr. Roberto Lucchini
Presbyterian Church, USA Louisville, KY	Dr. Victor E. Makari Mr. Harry Douglas Dicks
Progetto E Sviluppo Cail Rome	Ms. Sylvie Garoia Mr. Sergio Bassoli
Richard Kambulu Compassion Foundation Lusaka	Rev. Richard Kambulu
Salaam Children of the Olive Tree Rome	Mr. Roberto Giudici
Save the Global Masses Organization SAGLOMAS Tema, Ghana	Mr. Anim Brew Emmanuel Kwesi Mr. Oppone Danso Mr. George Sawyers Ms. Florence Boateng Mr. Prince Ntsiful
SARIDAB Social Advancement, Recreational, Industrial Development Association of Bangladesh Dhaka	Mr. Shamsul Islam Chowdhury Ms. Salma Chowdhury Mr. Zuned Hussain Mr. Md. Mazharul Hoque
Society of Inash El-Usra El Bireh	Ms. Sameeha S. Khalil
Spanish NGO Committee on the Question of Palestine, Madrid	Mr. Hans Devos
Synod of the Nile of the Evangelical Church of Egypt, Port Said, Egypt	Rev. Helmy Kades
Terra Nuova	Ms. Monica Mancini
Vlaams Palestina Komitee Brussels	Mr. Huysmans Guido Mr. Tul Declercq
Voice - Liaison Committee Brussels	Mr. Giovanni Rufini
World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations, Geneva	Mr. Judeh Najib J. Majaj
World Family Organisation Paris	Ms. Anna Castellani Tarabini
World Association of Writers Palestinian PEN, Jerusalem	Ms. Hanan Awwad

World Vision – Jerusalem East Jerusalem	Ms. Mary-Kate MacIsaac
Union of Palestinian American Women	Ms. Leila Diab
Youth Agricultural Development Organization Freetown, Sierra Leone	Ms. Momodu Sall Mr. Francis Bowaya Mr. Emmanuel A. Davies Mr. Ayo Campbell

Media

Agence France-Presse	Mr. P. Crampont Ms. S. Bloch Mr. B. Bartoloni Mr. Alain Jean-Robert
Agence Gamma	Mr. Livio Anticoli
Agence Maghreb Arab Press	Mr. Noureddine Amir
Agencia EFE	Mr. Franco Cignini
Agencia Iberpress	Mr. Dario de Dominicis
Agenzia AND Kronos	Ms. Maria Grazia Napolitano
Agenzia Giornalistica Italia	Ms. Anna Maria Crispino Mr. Carmelo Rapisarda
Al-Ahram	Mr. Mustafa Abdalla
Al-Quds Al-Arabi, London (Radio/ Television in Rome for Palestinians)	Mr. Samir Al Qaryouti
Algerian News Agency (Rome)	Mr. Abdelhamid Zouad
ANSA	Mr. Claudio Onorati Ms. Nicoletta Tamberlich
Antenna 3 TV	Mr. Antonio Pelayo Mr. Rafael Maturana
Associated Press	Ms. Candice Hugnes
Associated Press Foto	Mr. Massimo Sambucetti
Avvenire Milano	Mr. Romano Siciliani
Blue Sat 200	Ms. Rita Salerno

CNN	Mr. Gayle Young Ms. May Welsh Mr. Alan Mutic
Canale 23 – Teletuscolo	Mr. Roberto Marabitti
Catholic News Service	Ms. Lynne Weil
Corriere della Sera	Mr. Roberto Stagno
Deutsche Welle	Ms. Adriana Niemeyer
Diario de Noticias	Ms. Manuela Paixao Redmond
El Watan (Algeria)	Mr. Nacera Benalt
Giornale "Tribuna" (Mosca)	Mr. Victor Kroupenine
Graffiti Press	Ms. Vanessa Joannoni
ITAR-TASS	Mr. Oleg Ossipov
Kleine Zeitung (Austria)	
Le Figaro	Mr. Heuze Richard
Luca Nicosia	
MEDIASET	Ms. Domitilla Savignoni
MEDIASET TG 5	Mr. Stefano Serra Mr. Fabio Caratelli
MEDIASET ITALIA 1	Mr. Da Mario Mauro
Middle East International	Mr. Chris Dayle
Montecarlo SAT	Ms. Mirta Oriani Ambrosini
NBC-TV London	Mr. Rifaat El-Nagar
Notimex (Agenzia Stampa Messicana)	Mr. Mario Osario Beristan
Nuova Città News	Mr. Lelio Bernardi
Radio Vaticana	Ms. Bettina Gabbe Mr. Jamal Wadih Ward Mr. Izoard Antoine Ms. Judith Barrand Mr. Paolo Salerno

RAI-TV TG1 (Italy)	Mr. Fabio Pechini Mr. Giovanni Bocco Mr. Franco Cignini
RAI-TV TG2 (Italy)	Ms. Maria De Maria Mr. Giancarlo Caramico Mr. Enzo Lustri
RAI-TV TG3	Mr. Stefano Pinzetti Mr. Sandro Battaglia Mr. Francesco Tartaglia
REUTERS	Ms. Abigail Levene De Jongh
RTL 102.5	Mr. Francesco Mimmo
SAT 2000 (Rome)	Mr. Maurizio Di Schino Mr. Angelo Picariezzo
S.I.R. (Servizio Informazione Religiosa)	Mr. Thierry Bonaventura
"Sua Imaggine"	Mr. Riccardo Calamai Mr. Claudio Costantini
TeleMontecarlo	Ms. Gabriella Caimi
TELEVISA (Mexico)	Ms. Valentina Alazzari
Tertium Millenium Magazine	Mr. Guido Bossa
The Daily Telegraph	Mr. Gordon Martin
Vatican Television Centre	Mr. Ugo Moretto
WAFA (Rome)	Mr. Jamal Mohammed Jadallah

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